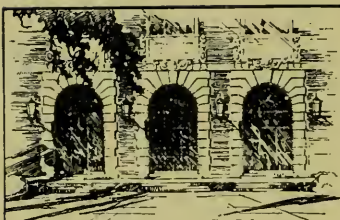


UTTERLY

MISTAKEN

ANNIE THOMAS





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UTTERLY MISTAKEN.

UTTERLY MISTAKEN.

A Novel.

BY

ANNIE THOMAS

(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP),

AUTHOR OF

"DENIS DONNE," "THE HONBLE. JANE,"

Etc., Etc.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO.,

31, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1893.

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO. LIMITED, GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

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UTTERLY MISTAKEN.



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CHAPTER I.

“IT WAS A WOMAN!”

“LYNTON on its hill, Lynmouth in its hole. It is so hard to free oneself from the fascination which each of these bits of Arcadia exercise over one, that were it not for the Cliff Railway life here would become an unbearable effort to taste the sweets of both.”

It was a woman who said these words. A woman who had tasted the sweets of life in many another bit of Arcadia, as well as in some of the most joyous cities of the world. A woman to whom many of the

most amusing denizens in the Beautiful City of Prague were well known. And yet, notwithstanding her charming experiences of Bohemianism, a woman who was now well contented to be what some of her friends termed “buried alive by the sea at Lynmouth.”

For on the day on which this story opens, it was blue, unclouded weather, a golden day in one of the most faultless summers that have been vouchsafed to us of late years.

Moreover, the one who listened to her was a man ; the only man who had aroused a genuine interest in her heart during all the thirty odd years of her sojourn upon earth.

They had been sauntering down the little esplanade which starts from the Rhenish

tower, and ends abreast of the Cliff Railway when she spoke, and when he answered they were midway up the almost perpendicular cliff which that railway scales. What he said then was :

"I have known Lynton and Lynmouth for the last ten years. Neither of them exercised the slightest fascination over me —till to-day."

He emphasised his last words with a steady searching look at her, but though she saw and felt the look, she neither by word or sign betrayed that she had the faintest comprehension of its meaning, or suffered the slightest embarrassment from its intensity. Her long dark lashed grey eyes looked back at him unfalteringly, "unfeelingly" he thought. Her delicately mobile mouth, that he had already dis-

covered quivered with every variation of its owner's most variable emotions, was at its most composed rest now.

“Is she cold and hard? or only a consummate actress?” he asked himself as the railway-car glided to its bourn at the top of the cliff, and he held his hand out to assist his fellow-passenger to alight. But she was engaged in collecting her sunshade, guide-book, purse, and ticket, and so either did not see, or could not take the extended hand.

There was the faintest expression of surprise about her eyebrows, as he, after hesitating for an instant, walked along by her side, accommodating his pace to hers with the evident intention of at least escorting her up into Lynton's principal street, and that this should be his intention

annoyed her. She was one of the few women who detest being sought, flattered, and followed, unless she had permitted a man to see that it was agreeable to her that he should do these things. No such grace as this had she extended to the man at her side. All that was masculine in the nature encased in that exquisitely feminine form rose in revolt at the successful opposition of his will to hers on this occasion. His mastery over her was brief, however, for as they came out into the street from the cliff lane, she halted, and without giving him either her hand or a smile, said :

"If I could sketch, I should envy you the colour-sensations you will have presently. I know how Wooda Bay looks on a morning like this."

“Why not drive out and see it for yourself? I want you to advise me, really I do! I can’t make up my mind which is the best view of Ley Abbey. You’d hit on it at once, and save me both time and trouble.”

“At the cost of wasting my own! Time is a thing I never waste, if I can help it. Trouble is a thing I never take—for anyone but myself! Good morning!”

She nodded carelessly and walked on, and he stood looking after her, admiring her well-developed figure, slender limbs, and high-bred points.

“She steps like a duchess on those slim little feet, and carries her handsome little head like one too! She makes me hate her with her confounded airs of ignoring my existence, and yet——! Well, I’m an ass to

hanker after her smiles and her presence, for even if she were willing I wouldn't tie myself up to such a prettily perfect piece of selfishness for all the world could offer me. Good-bye to you, Mrs. Poynter! Don't be afraid that I shall try to make you waste any more time and trouble about me."

He had turned and was walking slowly and reluctantly towards the Valley of Rocks, of which he had promised himself that he would make a series of sketches this morning. His chance meeting with a woman whom he believed to be in Algiers, at the Rhenish Tower just now, had quenched his ardour for sketching and rekindled his ardour for her! It has been shown how his infirmity of purpose was rewarded.

“She must be thirty-three or four if she’s a day,” he told himself. “What’s the good of reminding myself of *that* though! Every year she owns to has given her a new charm or perfected an old one. They say she was lovely at twenty! she’s that now, and that’s the least of her attractions. Where the devil *does* the fascination come in? for she doesn’t try to please or make me think about her?”

He was a fine-made, well set-up fellow of thirty-five or thereabouts, who thought this. A man who, although not a soldier, had seen a good deal of hard fighting on the recent battle-fields of the world as “war-correspondent” to three or four of our foremost dailies. His pen had made him honoured and renowned, but it had

not made him rich. Plenty of money had been made, but even more had been spent, for Guy St. Austle came of an open-handed race, and he was continually forgetting that it was his brother, Sir Walter, who had the title, estates and family money-bags. On the whole it was not astonishing that he should sometimes have allowed his memory to play him false on this point, for Sir Walter was his senior by three minutes only, and during their childhood and youth the twins had shared alike, and no difference had been made in the treatment they received from parents, friends, and satellites.

But when their father died there came a change. Sir Walter did not alter to Guy, but Guy altered to himself and every one around him. His brother was not only

anxious to continue the allowance Guy had always received from their father, but to add to it in a princely way. But Guy would have none of it. He did not pose as an injured man or a martyr, but he went cheerfully away from the luxurious home and equally luxurious club-life, with nothing but the proceeds of the sale of his own favourite mare in his pocket, and when his family heard of him again, it was as "that plucky beggar St. Austle, a fellow who was always to the front, whose graphic accounts of 'the war day by day' in the *Universal Circulator*, seemed to bring the battle-fields into our very midst."

After this his professional paths were those of pleasantness to him. The high-bred gentleman not only held a graceful and vigorous pen, but he was as well

versed in the arts of peace as he was in those of war, as much at home in Clubland as he was under canvas on the tented field. Consequently his contributions to magazine and journalistic literature were caught up as quickly as he could write them. Still he did not make money, or rather he could not keep what he made. It flew through his fingers as fast as his pen flew over the paper. But however hard up he might find himself at times, he preferred the temporary embarrassment to accepting any of the pecuniary aid which his brother eagerly pressed on him.

Five years before he came into this story at Lynmouth he had made the great blunder of his life. He had fallen in what he thought was love with a girl who was a revelation to him in the way of loveli-

ness. Some time after she was an even greater revelation to him in the way of fatuous silliness, but in the meantime he had spoken out not only to her but to her people, and these latter held him as if he had been in a vice.

Luckily for him marriage was out of the question when they were first engaged, as there was no war on, and his other engagements were not sufficiently remunerative for him to embark upon the matrimonial sea with a wife who fancied that silken sails were the only ones she could cruise under. More luckily still, when a war did break out it was in a country that was pregnant with the seeds of every kind of known fever, and his Laura suffered agonies of fear that his letters might convey the fatal taint to her. Urged on by this fear,

she made a magnanimous proposal to the effect that they should not correspond during his absence. The truth being that in addition to the terror she was in of contagion from his letters, she was oppressed by the dour doubt that he would discover her to be the mere pretty puff-ball she was if she wrote and he had time to read hers. It did not occur to her that he had already made the discovery, so she was slightly chagrined when he assented to her proposition without demur. Her mother offered to receive and fumigate letters for her, but to this Guy St. Austle would not agree. Her eldest brother too, bearing in mind the fact that Sir Walter St. Austle was still a bachelor, offered himself as a medium. But Guy was staunch to himself. "There could be no

mediumship between himself and a woman he loved," he said ; " between them it must be hand-to-hand, lip-to-lip, heart-to-heart." Laura Davis shrugged her well-draped shoulders when she heard this, and assured her anxious brother that there " would be no hand-to-hand or lip-to-lip business between them after Guy came home till she was quite, *quite* certain that he had been thoroughly disinfected."

"Pray God deliver me from evil—and fools!" he said as he stepped on board the old trooper by which he had obtained a passage out from Portsmouth. He took out Laura's photograph presently, and looked at it, and tried to set his pulses beating at sight of her perfectly coloured, shaped and clothed beauty. But his pulses would not obey him. "Yet I loved her

madly for a week or two," he thought scornfully—of himself! Then he put the photograph away in haste and disgust, thinking vexedly and disappointedly:

"The d—d nuisance of it is, I shall never love as madly and happily again. She's spoilt that for me."

His fine physique carried him through all malarial dangers till nearly the end of the campaign. Then he fell ill, so ill that he nearly lost the life which that illness made worth living. There were paragraphs in the English journals about his alarming condition, of course, and these were pointed out to Laura by her watchful friends. Simultaneously another paragraph concerning the St. Austles appeared in the London dailies: "Sir Walter St. Austle, Bart., is about to lead to the

hymeneal altar Mabel, only daughter of Pierce Robins, Esq., of Manchester. It is reported that the bride will bring to her husband a fortune of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, in addition to her large share in the Warlington Mill factory." Miss Laura Davis read the two paragraphs with commendable attention, and then with delicate tact referred to the one that concerned Guy only.

"It will be a great relief to Mr. St. Austle to know that I am not worrying and fussing myself into an illness about him," she said calmly to her brother, "so it would be nice of you, Robert, to send him a line telling him that he is quite a free man as far as we are concerned, and that I had rather not hear anything more

about him after this, and anything else nice that you can think of you know."

"His chances are dished for the baronetcy and money!" her brother remarked gloomily.

"Oh! I never thought of *that*," Laura replied glibly. "Now do write to him like a dear old boy to-day! It's so dreadful to have anything hanging over one's head. It may help him to turn the corner towards recovery if he hears that I am quite resigned, quite prepared not to worry myself a bit more about our silly little affair whether he lives or dies."

Laura had never made herself actively obnoxious to her family, but she had always been a beautiful dead-weight upon the more active members of it. The vision of her consigned to the care and keeping

of the St. Austles had been agreeable to the responsible members of the Davis family. Therefore there was something heroic in the attitude assumed by her eldest—and most responsible—brother now.

“I’ll write and tell Guy St. Austle the decision you’ve come to, Laura, and ’pon my honour if there’s a spark of gratitude in human nature the fellow ought to give me a pension for life for being the messenger of such good news.”

She looked at him for a moment or two with big, beautiful, surprised blue eyes. Then she said, quite unexcitedly :

“You mean he will be glad to get rid of me so easily ? So he will be, but all the same he won’t be able to get over the feeling for the girl he thought I was at first. But don’t let us talk about him any

more," she added hurriedly, "there may be fever, malarial fever! deadly fever! in the very mention of his name. I dislike all these subjects so much, danger and death! I've never put myself in the way of danger, and never courted the idea of death! He lives in an atmosphere of both, and he'll never have the family title or the family money now that twin-brother of his is going to be married. *Do* promise me you'll write and settle it as I wish to-day."

"I will, dear—and you?" her brother said quietly.

"I? Oh! don't trouble about me, Robert. Old Dauntton will give you an extra share in the business the day I marry him, and he would marry me to-morrow if I liked."

"Then," said her brother, thinking of

himself first, as we are all apt to do, “you’re an infernal little fool if you don’t like! Here goes for the letter to St. Austle,” he added, with admirably selfish promptitude and decision, and sure enough, that night that letter went.

Guy St. Austle came out of his malarial fever and broken engagement a stronger man, physically and mentally, than when he had gone into them. He had expected great things in the way of debilitating, poisoning and corroding from the climate, and the climate had not disappointed him. On the other hand, he had expected nothing that had any connection whatever with womanly dignity, fidelity or sympathy, from Laura Davis, and his scanty expectations were chillingly realised. He did not waste a sigh of regret on the thought of

that beautiful body of hers with which he had been briefly enraptured. He had not a single thrilling thought of her garnered up in his mind. To him she appeared now to have been nothing better than a beautiful, tasteless fruit!—a marvellously well-wrought piece of artistic wax-work, animated from within by a puerile set of uninteresting mechanical contrivances.

“ And I’ve wasted my love on that thing ! ” he thought. “ What shall I have to give if a real woman ever crosses my path ! ”

CHAPTER II.

“ I HAVE LIVED ! ”

SHE did not attempt to deceive herself by any pretence of being glad that she had got rid of him, when she sent him off to the Valley of Rocks to sketch, and pursued her way to the Lynton circulating library alone. But she was conscious of there being a lessened restraint upon her when she felt that he had marched out of sight in the opposite direction.

The works of fiction that were submitted to her for approval were numerous and good, but she had read the majority of them some seasons ago. She turned them aside, not impatiently or contemptuously,

but with promptitude and decision, and went back to the counter, behind which the mistress of the establishment stood apologetically anxious.

"I'm not difficult to please, nor do I suffer from want of purpose in making a selection," she said, with a smile that made the mistress of the library commence unpacking the latest consignment of light literature from Mudie's at once; "but I'm afraid I must go away empty-handed to-day. Your old novels have been my own familiar friends for years, and the later ones all deal with that 'Young love,' which is pretty enough in fiction, and pathetically silly in fact."

"I can recommend you some admirable sporting novels, Madam: 'The Girl in the Olive-green Wide-awake'; 'Blue-

habited Miss Brunker'; 'Her Flea-bitten Filly'; 'The Lost Leader, a tandem tale'; there's not much pathetically silly love in any of these, Mrs. Poynter."

"But there is even more pathetically spurious sport," Mrs. Poynter thought. However, she said nothing, but waited, turning over the leaves of a photograph album, while the librarian unpacked her new books.

"Here's something that's *new*, at any rate," the latter said presently, handing two volumes across to her customer. "Whether it will suit you, or is good, I can't say. I ordered it because the gentleman who wrote it is staying at the Lyndale Hotel, and one takes an interest in a book when one has seen the writer of it."

Mrs. Poynter took the volume, glanced

at the title and author's name on the cover, and put it down, saying quietly :

"This, seasoned with a few others, will do. I will send my little maid for them by-and-bye."

"He's a very fine-looking gentleman, this Mr. Guy St. Austle," the librarian continued, pursuing her own train of thought. "I've read in one of the Society papers that interviewed him once, that he's been hardly used by his family. They're very high, the St. Austles ; and it seems he would go and get his experiences for writing in ways that didn't suit their pride. He went first for a common soldier, but it was soon found out that he was writing home the most beautiful accounts of the war to the papers, so he got his commission, and now his family receive him again."

Mrs. Poynter listened with pretty, flattering interest to this fairy tale. It was not much more like the real story, which she knew well, than are the majority of the garbled descriptions given of so-called celebrities in the majority of so-called Society journals. But she was not inclined to stand forth and do battle for the truth on behalf of Guy St. Austle. And this passive spirit was not the result of indifference. It arose from the profound conviction she had that she knew him better than anyone else in the world did. So what matter what others said or thought of him?

An hour later she was buried in the depths of a big, old-fashioned leather chair, that was not beautiful to the eye, but wonderfully soothing to the body. On

her right, the trim little garden that runs down to the banks of the brawling, merrily cascading West Lyn, was visible through the Gothic window, and waves of perfume were being wafted in upon her from its brilliant beds of bloom. Unconsciously, the beauty and sweetness of the flowers worked with a softening, relaxing influence upon her mental system. She was permitting herself to delight in reading that story wherein the author's earnest, passionate love for herself revealed itself in every page.

The title "I have Lived," had not prepared her for what she was reading. It had rather led her to anticipate that it would be a history or rather a series of reminiscences of the bolder, more adventurous and physically manly side of his

career. She was not prepared to read, as she was reading now, that he had only begun to live according to his own acceptance of the word on the day he knew her first, and that he had lived on the thought of her and on the hope of her ever since.

She put the open book down on the table, and bent her head down till her lips were lightly laid on the passage that had told her the truth. "Adam might as easily have sought a mate among the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, or the fishes of the sea, after having seen his Eve, as I might give look, word, or thought of love to any other woman after the one brief glimpse I have had of her below the surface. And though I may never see her again I shall be solitary in the flesh only,

for her mind, her soul, her heart, will be *mine* for ever."

So Guy St. Austle made his hero speak and feel after a two years' separation from the woman who had taught him that to live without the love she could give him would be no life at all. She kissed the printed words, then lifted her head quickly, laughing and blushing at the folly of it, though there had been no one there to witness the action.

"I want a tonic, I think, I am getting weak in my old age," she said to herself, "and the best tonic I can have is the remembrance that I heard him say once that he would tear his heart out of his body rather than let it go into the keeping of a woman who had been either a loving or an unloving wife. He has forgotten

that sentiment I think; but *I* must not forget that he uttered it once and would feel it again if I let him follow his impulse and conquer me now."

She moved about the little room catching glimpses of herself now and again in the square paper-frilled glass over the mantelpiece. And as she did so she caught a reflection of her head held higher and of a light of pride and something else in her darkly fringed eyes.

"He went nearly mad for beauty once, they say," she thought, and her chest heaved passionately as she added with sweet triumph and gratitude mingled, "but that was the desire of the moth for the candle. What he feels for me is—well! what I feel for him I suppose, and that is that there is no one above him and no one

beyond him for me. But I have been a wife! Whether I was an affectionate or an unloving one makes no difference to the veto his principles have put upon his love."

When she took up his book again, she felt that she knew beforehand what every page would bring forth and how it would end.

"If it is as I think then I shall know that he has not given me up, and shall be fore-armed to fight for him against himself," she said. It did end as she knew it would, and for an hour after she had read the last line she could not force her hand to relinquish its loving hold upon the book.

As for her thoughts, while her clinging fingers were caressing the words that had

come straight from his heart to hers, they were of the mixed sweet and bitter order which are apt to fill the mind of a woman very much and hopelessly in love, whether she may be only twenty, or an "old thing of thirty-five," as twenty would probably describe Mrs. Poynter. She thought how brave and steadfast he was to have held on to such a forlorn hope as finding and winning her all these years. She also thought how glad—how gratefully glad she was that in all respects she had grown worthier of that faithful love of his. She tried to feel humbly grateful, but the effort to attain humility was beyond her. Her heart swelled with pride as she reflected that this man, who was as wax in her hands, was no mere common-place, more or less gallant and gay gentleman, whose ways had been

made so easy for him by the world that in all things he regarded the fulfilment of his heart's desire as merely his due. Here was a man whose ways had been rough-hewn from the moment he had reached manhood and become a responsibility to himself. And in every way, in all things, he had vindicated his manhood and justified the judgment of Nature and Providence in thrusting that responsibility upon him. "He may have erred, he may have gone astray, but never meanly or dishonourably. Oh, Guy! thank God that I am loved by you!—though for your own sake you must never know that I repay that love a hundredfold. I must never forget that I have been a wife, though you would forget it for a time."

Towards evening, having nearly learnt

his story by heart, and finding that certain phrases which had caught her taste were constantly rising to her lips, she came to the conclusion that its presence in her room was decidedly injurious to her composure. So putting on her hat she took his eloquently silent ambassador under her arm and went down to the Cliff Railway, intending to return "I Have Lived" to the library at Lynton on the hill. But before she could reach the car it began its gliding ascent, and being restless she decided not to wait for the next journey up, but to go instead and saunter through Glen Lyn to its crowning glory, The Seven Falls.

The Lyndale Hotel is close to the entrance of Glen Lyn, as everyone knows who visits Lynmouth, but no one temporarily sojourning in the place can be

expected to know where other sojourners are staying, or if they know they cannot be expected to remember. Guy St. Austle happened to be staying at the Lyndale, and the close proximity of its entrance-gate made Glen Lyn seem the most appropriate place for an after-dinner stroll and pipe. Mrs. Poynter had not passed through the gate ten minutes before Guy was through it also, and she felt before she saw or heard him that he was on her track.

He did not address her by name or offer any of the conventional greetings when he came abreast of her. He only said :

"You spoilt my sketching this morning. Why were you so unlike your old self?"

"Unlike my younger self you mean."

"Unlike the Mabel Poynter who first taught me to know what a real man's real

life should be. I had been existing in the shade! I had been dancing with shadows until I met you, and you know it!"

"Since you met me have you *lived*?" And for the life of her she could not repress the triumphant note of joy—of more than joy!—which rose up and rang through her words.

"Then you *have* read my story?"

She bent her head in assent.

"Mabel! I wanted to ask if you had read it this morning, but you made me feel such an unwelcome intruder here that I dared not ask."

"I am glad you didn't; I should have had to say No then. I have read it to-day for the first time—read it since I parted from you in Lynton this morning."

"And you are—you think—?" He paused,

for she had not been able to veil her eyes, and he had read something of the feeling which she had for him in that momentary glance. "Forgive me," he said, "forgive me for having made you my theme, the motive power on which turns all that's decently good in any sense in the book."

"Forgive you! for what?"

"For having disregarded the obvious desire you have to get away from and obliterate me——"

"After reading 'I have Lived,' I should be the proudest woman in the world to-day—if you had not made me that already," she said, softly. "You have shown me that our friendship has not made a deeper impression upon me than it has upon you; you have made me feel that I was not wrong in thinking of you as I do, as of the *one* man

in the world on whom I may have most absolute trust and reliance."

They had reached the little bridge under the falls now, and were sitting down on a mossy boulder. It seemed that there was nothing to come between them!—a few words and the mists might all have been cleared away. He had forgotten that he had once said he would never link his lot with a woman who had been either an affectionate or an unloving wife to other any man. On this evening by the Falls of Glen Lyn he might have taught her to forget them too. But he made no attempt to do so, having wiped them clean off the slate of his memory. All he remembered, all he thought of now was that he had loved this baffling woman for a long time, and longed for her constant companionship,

which made him feel better, brighter, braver and more at rest than he had ever felt before he knew her.

"Trust me, and rely upon me in the way I prayed you to do two years ago!" he was saying, when there came the sound of hurrying footsteps over dry, parched grass, and the next moment a man—Guy's counterpart!—with a huge brindled bull-dog at his heels, made his way across the river, over the rocks, and joined them.

"Given you a surprise, old man," he began, heartily clapping Guy on the shoulder, then doffing his cap to Mrs. Poynter he apologised for an unreasonable intrusion at an untimely hour.

"The fact is I have tracked Guy from Ilfracombe through the visitors'

books, and I haven't seen him for twelve months," he explained, and the lady rose at once, shaking the dew from her delicately laced skirts, and looking up at the sky, which is always ready to betoken rain in Devonshire.

"The interruption is an agreeable one as far as I am concerned. Your brother and I very rarely meet, Sir Walter, and when we do there is one vexed question which we never can settle. We had just raised it when you came."

"Put the matter before me and I'll settle it—as Guy wishes," he said boldly.

"The matter has been before you since the beginning of time," she said, giving a hand impartially to each man over river-encircled rocks. "It is only this—must the woman *always* be the weaker vessel,

to be alternately vindicated and condemned?"

"*You're* not going in for politics or county councils, or any other freedwoman's rights, are you?" Sir Walter asked.

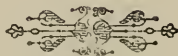
As she faced him closely she thought, "The twin shells are alike, but the kernels have a distinct flavour."

"The only 'woman's right' I go in for is the right to help a man to do his best to be true to himself, just as a man comrade would help him," she said.

Then she gathered her delicately laced skirts around her—she had changed from the well-made tailor costume of the morning into something flimsier, but distinctly more graceful, in honour of herself—and stepped along the river stones on the downward path towards Lynmouth.

“Engaged to her?” Walter hurriedly whispered to his twin brother, and Guy made no verbal reply, merely wagged his head angrily.

“Free, then ! and by Jove ! something worth going into fetters for. Guy, she’s the most fascinating woman I ever saw in my life.”



CHAPTER III.

SIR WALTER.

THAT rumour which had crept into print some years before these days at Lynmouth, relative to Sir Walter St. Austle's approaching marriage, had been absolutely unfounded. At the same time it must be confessed that he had not been altogether innocent of having set it afloat. The truth being that without Guy's knowledge or consent, he had dealt a blow for Guy's freedom by leading Miss Laura Davis to suppose that Guy was no longer worth the chains he had suffered her to put upon him, now that his heirship was imperilled.

His was a livelier, lighter, more change-

able nature than Guy's. Perhaps circumstances had more to do with the difference between the twin brothers than inherent qualities. All things had gone smoothly alike with both the boys until their father died. From that day, however, most things had gone roughly, very roughly, with Guy for a time ; and even now, though he was successful and fairly prosperous, one thing was going very hardly with him indeed.

They were remarkably alike in person, both being fine, well-grown, athletic-looking men, pale in complexion, close-cropped, aquiline featured. But there were points of difference between them, all of which went to show that Guy was the stronger in many ways. His grey eyes were not so large as Walter's well-opened blue ones, but they were steadier and more penetrat-

ing. His hair was the same tint as Walter's when they were boys, but years of exposure to tropical suns had changed it from a sunny brown to nearly black. It was thicker, stronger hair than that which covered Walter's head. Both the men were the fortunate possessors of firm, well-cut mouths, and Guy's closely-shaven chin carried out the expression of his lips, whereas Walter's, though nicely moulded, lacked decision and power. Walter's neck at the back of his head was wide and fleshy, Guy's was clean-cut and muscular, without a line in it that betokened sensuality. Walter's eyes roved with open, undisguised admiration in them after every pretty woman they caught sight of, no matter what her age or condition. Guy held himself proudly aloof from the temptation to

allow his eyes to express any feeling that he would not have dared to word.

As in their faces so in their figures, there were distinctive traits which revealed themselves to perceptive eyes. Of equal height and bulk, Guy was the stronger and at the same time the sparer of the two, yet the muscles of his arms and legs were developed in a way that made Walter's fleshier ones seem small beside them. Nevertheless, at first sight, people were apt to think the blue-eyed, sunny-haired baronet the "better-looking fellow of the two." He smiled and showed his white teeth far more frequently than Guy did, consequently the baronet was also declared to be "far the better-tempered fellow of the two" by superficial observers. Mabel Poynter was not a superficial observer, and was disposed

to think the best that could be thought of Guy's twin brother. Nevertheless, on this first day of their meeting, against her will, she was obliged to admit to herself that she did not like Sir Walter St. Austle.

When they came out from the Glen Lyn grounds the men, as a matter of course, escorted her to the door of her lodgings in Gothic Cottage, and here Guy prepared to detach himself from the chain which her mere presence flung over him, but Sir Walter, whose eyes were much fascinated and fixed upon her, interposed :

“The night is too good to waste in the house—the sea will be looking ripping under the moon. There's a beach, or an esplanade of sorts, isn't there? Come and take a few turns on it, Mrs. Poynter?”

She assented at once, walking on between

them and talking to them impartially in the frankest way possible. She saw that there was something more than pleasure in Guy's face at this slight concession which she was making to his unexpressed wishes, and she took herself to task for having relaxed that rule which she had appointed herself to observe.

“If he would only be content with my friendship, my true, loyal, hearty comradeship, this sort of thing might go on, but as it is he won't take half a loaf, and I won't give him the whole one to his hurt.”

No, and she wouldn't have liked it if he had been contented to take the half loaf. His love was the dearest, sweetest, proudest thing life had ever put within her reach, and if he had been contented to give her friendship now instead of it, she would have

died of the wound the change would give her.

At the same time she could not help fighting against him and herself for what she believed to be his good, and the staunchness of his principles.

They sat down on the seat by the Rhenish tower, and two of them would have been pleased enough to let golden silence obtain, for they were together! close together! Her cloak brushed his coat-sleeve, and the brim of her broad-leaved hat brushed his shoulder. He longed to take her little ungloved hand as it laid upon her lap, its fingers twisting about a bit of purple heather unceasingly. But he was not a man who ever took the faintest shadow of a familiarity with a woman. If she had looked at him, and moved her hand the eighth of an

inch towards his, he would have known that he would not offend by taking that precious little hand in his own, and pressing some of the feelings of his heart into it. But she did not look at him, nor did she move her hand the eighth of an inch towards his. So he sat still, seeming to look at the sea, while in reality not a single change of expression flitted over the face that was so dear to him without his taking keen and ample note of it.

Silence held no charm for Sir Walter. He was in high, almost excited, spirits, for he had not seen Guy for several months, and the one thing in which the twin brothers were precisely similar was the unswerving, intense, and absolute devotion each had for the other.

To be with Guy—and a charming woman

who knew when to speak and when to be quiet—by the sea under a bright moon on a hot night, would have been sufficient of itself to raise Sir Walter's spirits to an exuberant pitch. But in addition to this he had dined, and dined well, at the Valley of Rocks Hotel, and though he had not taken too much wine he had taken a good deal. He was full of a new project too, and a man is generally in ecstatic spirits when he is nourishing and cherishing the infancy of a scheme by which he is bound to win—or lose—an enormous amount of money. At this time, whenever he was not thinking how glad he was to be with old Guy again, and to have a chance of “chumming up” with Mrs. Poynter, he was thinking of his new racing establishment, of a couple of two-year-olds, who would pull him in a princely

fortune if they didn't happen to be poisoned before they could run for the Blue Ribbon, and of The Knight and The Knave, two stallions that he had recovered from America at a cost which he hardly liked to count yet.

"I wish you could see them," he said, speaking of the two-year olds, and addressing Mrs. Poynter, "there's a bit of the Godolphin strain in them; they've those large, soft, prominent eyes that you only see in horses with a bit of Arab blood in them. Their pasterns are as delicate as your wrist."

He caught hold of Mrs. Poynter's hand as he spoke, and held it up for a moment in the moonlight, and during that moment Cainish sensations pervaded Guy's breast.

Mabel took back her hand as if it had been

a bit of ice conveniently near to illustrate Sir Walter's meaning ; for one moment she caught her lip in and bit it hard. How could any other man than Guy dare to take her hand in his in that way without her permit ? She knew that Guy would not have done it, if even a dog had been an on-looker. For Sir Walter to have done it before another man, before Guy, shocked her, and would have angered her if he had not been Guy's brother.

“Let us walk about,” she said, rising up and drawing the folds of her red cloak closely about her. It was a gracefully-cut garment, high on the shoulders as the fashion of the day is, richly lined with wadded silk, and trimmed with grey astrachan. One hand, the hand that twiddled the bit of heather, not the one that Sir Walter

had dared to touch, crept out and held the folds of this cloak over her breast.

“You make a lovely picture, you and Guy,” Sir Walter said, suddenly standing apart and looking at them approvingly.

She made an impatient motion of her head ; it was so slight that only Guy saw and understood it. Then she remembered that he was Guy’s brother, and said :

“Tell me more about your horses ; I am very fond of horses, they understand one so well, and never misunderstand one. What are these two-year-olds called that are to bring such fame and fortune on the turf to the St. Austles?”

“They may come to grief ; I told you I wasn’t boastful about them,” Sir Walter answered reproachfully.

“I am sure you wouldn’t be boastful

about anything," she said; "you are too much like ——" She hesitated for half a second, and then said, "your brother ever to be boastful; but you are very sanguine."

"So would you be sanguine if you owned these two-year-olds, and as for Guy's not being 'boastful,' I think he must be a bloodless sort of chap if he doesn't let out a bit of his elation at having kept your friendship for the last four years——"

"You have not told us what you've called the two-year-olds," Guy interrupted impatiently. That his brother should dare to offer broad flatteries to such a woman as Mrs. Poynter annoyed and distressed him, the more so that he (Guy) was made the cause for the commission of the offence.

"Performer and Promise of May, they're

both entered for the Two Thousand next May. Performer will make the running for the Promise. Will you back my colours, Mrs. Poynter ? ”

“ The Promise ought to make the running for the Performer if there’s anything in a name,” she replied, and then it was explained to her that “ the Performer is the sweetest-tempered horse that was ever foaled, and absolutely trustworthy. The Promise of May, like many another fair beauty, is capricious and apt to lose her temper over trifles. But the little chap who’s to ride her knows her right through, and never puts her out by any chance. My trainer says that the sympathy between the boy and the filly is so strong that she’ll always want what her jockey wants, and rather break her heart than not do what

he wants her to do. He'll certainly want to win the Two Thousand, for if he does his fortune's made, and the Promise will do all she knows to please him, so I think I'm pretty safe, and you may lay on her freely."

"What are your racing colours?"

"Black and green."

"They don't sound pretty."

"But they are, they're so awfully neat. It's not a vivid bright green, but a soft, greyish green. You must see her run for the Derby, too."

"Perhaps I shall not be in England by that time." She glanced hastily at Guy as she said this, and saw a sudden quiver pass over his mouth. "Poor fellow! I wish he could realise that it is only for his sake that I am making him temporarily un-

happy," she thought, and pity moved her to add, "It is equally probable though that I may be settled down at the time in my little Kensington house. I am a very uncertain woman as far as my movements; I have no ties and very few friends, though I have hundreds of acquaintances. Consequently I go and come as the humour takes me."

"Dull work travelling alone, isn't it?"

"No, I take all my interests with me you see, that is one good outcome of my isolated position."

"It can't be a case with you of 'I care for nobody, no not I, and nobody cares for me'?"

"Indeed you are right, Sir Walter. I am not such a forlorn creature as I should be if I could apply those lines to my own

case. I care for some people—a few—very much.”

“And everyone who meets you must care for you!” Sir Walter rushed his words out tumultuously, and then felt ashamed of having paid her such a crude compliment. “As we are all here together you must honour Guy and myself by letting us disturb your solitude sometimes. The great thing in these places is to get away from them as much as we can. Let us make an excursion to Porlock to-morrow. I did my guide-book all the way from Ilfracombe, and it fired me with the idea of seeing the country between here and Porlock without delay.”

“We can go by coach to Porlock from Lynton,” Mrs. Poynter said, and Guy’s heart bounded; she was assenting to a proposition

that would keep him in her company the whole of the next day!

“No, no, we won’t go by coach,” Sir Walter said eagerly; “we’ll rig up a dog-cart tandem, and I’ll drive you and Guy over.”

“You can’t get even a couple of crocks that will go together tandem in this place, Walter,” Guy put in hurriedly.

“Then I’ll wire to Barnstaple for a dog-cart tandem to be sent over here to-morrow, and we’ll defer the excursion to Porlock till the day after,” Sir Walter replied, with the buoyant air of one who is accustomed to have his own way in all matters both great and small.

“I hope you won’t trust yourself behind a tandem on that Porlock road. For a good distance you drive along the edge of

a sheer cliff, that goes right down into the sea, with nothing between you and destruction but a railing about a foot and a half high," Guy said, addressing Mrs. Poynter.

"She would have to go on the top of a coach along that same road if she doesn't go with me," Walter put in. "Come, Mrs. Poynter, I'm sure you're plucky, and I never knew Guy shirk anything in the way of danger before. We St. Austles never do come to grief where horses are concerned. Surely you'd as soon trust me as you would a stage coachman."

"I am not shirking anything for myself. I'll go with you, Walter, readily enough, but, for God's sake, don't persuade Mrs. Poynter——"

"I'm persuaded already," she interrupted. If *he* went she was ready to face the

danger, for if anything happened to him, what good would her own life be to her ?

“Brava! well done. That’s settled then. I wire for the tandem—the smartest Barnstaple can turn out—to be sent over to-morrow, and the day after we’ll negotiate the road between here and Barnstaple. Now what shall we do to-morrow? Go to the Doone Valley and stir up the red deer, and look for traces of John Ridge and his Lorna?”

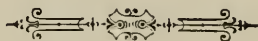
“How restless you are,” she laughed. “Now I should suggest that in view of the Porlock drive the day after, I had better take to-morrow quietly by the sea with a book, and you two gentlemen had better fish up to Watersmeet. You want to do the right thing by Lynmouth on the occasion of your first visit to it I am sure,

Sir Walter, and it is one of the *rightest* things to do to fish up the East Lyn."

"Why shouldn't you take your book up to Watersmeet, and encourage us when you see our energies flagging?" Sir Walter asked boldly. "You said just now that you had no one to consider but yourself, and were rather mournful about it. Now just consider us to-morrow, and put the finishing touch to our enjoyment of fly-fishing and Watersmeet by going up with us."

"Then you must let me be your hostess; you must lunch with me at the Swiss Cottage. On that condition, that I may be of some use to a couple of zealous and hungry fly-fishermen, I will give up my restful hours by the sea and go up to Watersmeet to-morrow."

“I shouldn’t have dared to ask you,” Guy took an opportunity of muttering, while his brother was momentarily engrossed by a vision he had just caught of a white-frocked beautiful woman coming slowly towards them. “Laura, by Jove! will she spot Guy, I wonder?” he thought.



CHAPTER IV.

UNDER ELECTRIC LIGHT.

DEVONSHIRE happened to be a favourite haunt of the British tripper during the months of that summer which has already been described as faultless. A picturesque journalist, who had spent a pleasant day or two between Porlock and Ilfracombe, had run up the region in a glowing article which made everyone who read the *Universal Circulator* long to be under the cliffs by the sea at Lynmouth, or on the edge of them at Lynton. "Purple Heath and Precipitous Pleasures" was the title of his charming descriptive sketch, and

forthwith thousands of the millions among whom the *U. C.* circulated pined to be under and on the edge of these heath-crowned cliffs, and hundreds packed up their travelling trunks and gratified their pining.

Among those who did this was Mr. Davis, the great varnish merchant of Old Broad Street and Bow (where the manufactory is). He was the head of the house now, the husband of a wife, the father of several children, and, to his chagrin, the sole protector of his beautiful sister Laura.

For lovely Laura had failed to fulfil what some people hold to be woman's highest mission in this world. She had had many lovers, she had been the placid recipient of many fairly good offers of marriage, but—there had always been a

“but” about the men who proposed to her.

“The plain-spoke lad was *far* too rough,
The rich young man was not rich enough;
And one was too poor, and one too tall,
And one just an inch too short for——”

Miss Laura Davis.

So she was still hanging on the virginal bough, a ripe, a very ripe fruit! at which many a man had pecked since the day she released Guy St. Austle, but which no one had been able to pluck yet.

She was the beautiful vision in a white frock of whom Sir Walter caught sight as she advanced towards them, the redeeming feature of an otherwise extremely commonplace and unattractive family party. As often happens in the case of brothers of extremely good-looking girls, Mr. Robert Davis was unprepossessing in appearance to

a marked degree. He was large and fair, like Laura, but in figure he was flabbily fat, and in complexion ruddier than the cherry. His bigness gave one an impression of strength or power, and though he was a keen, energetic man of business, one forgot his face and such expression as it held the moment one lost sight of it.

His wife supplemented him well. Her money had helped greatly to set him on his legs in the City when he married her, and he never forgot this fact, and, more extraordinary still, he never omitted an opportunity of showing her that he held her timely aid in most grateful remembrance. If he was ever guilty of an extravagant act, he committed it for the sake of giving her some pleasure or present. He would have had exactly the same

amount of regard and the same feeling of gratitude towards any other woman whose money had helped him at the crisis of his life. But this one happened to have been in the way with her wealth and her willingness to marry him, and he repaid her to the best of his ability.

He had assured her when they married that his sister Laura would not be a burden upon them long.

“There are at least a dozen fellows after her, and each one of them would be a good match, so she’s sure to settle soon. Till she does you won’t find her a nuisance, Anna; she’s the best-tempered girl in the world, and you can make her useful in the house.”

“Making her useful in the house means giving her authority in the house, and

that I don't mean anyone but myself to have, Robert," she said quietly, and there that matter ended. But though Laura had no authority in the house she stayed in it for what Mrs. Robert Davis thought an unconscionably long time, owing to that fastidiousness of hers which found something wanting in all the men who sought her with matrimonial intentions.

It was hard upon Laura that her fastidiousness should have stood in the way of her comfortable settlement in a home of her own, for she was regarded as very much in the way in the home of her brother. There was no active animosity shown to her by Mrs. Robert Davis. In fact, the latter constantly addressed her as "dear," and invariably pointedly called attention to any little useful act which Laura might

now and then perform in the house. But the way in which she called attention to them showed the fact up strongly, that Laura's acts of usefulness were exceptional things. It was astonishing, too, how often the room which Laura occupied would have come in handy for the accommodation of some person or other whom Robert especially desired to accommodate. When the annual summer outings were discussed, if Laura unadvisedly expressed a slight preference for one place over another, that place was sure to be the one that disagreed more than any other spot on earth with Mrs. Robert Davis. These were slight crosses taken separately, perhaps, but taken collectively and borne continually they would have been exasperating beyond endurance to a less sweet-tempered, thick-

skinned and unsensitive nature than Laura's. As it was, she bore innuendoes and slights with a cheerful indifference that sometimes made Mrs. Robert Davis think that she would leave off aiming them at her pretty sister-in-law any longer. But the next day she would forget this resolution, and another surreptitious shot would be fired into the handsome iron-clad, apparently not at all to its discomfiture.

But all the while, under this affably callous demeanour, Laura was thoroughly perceptive and calmly resentful of the intangible affronts that were perpetually being put upon her. They did not sting and hurt her much, but they annoyed her at times and made her less graciously sweet in manner, and therefore less prettily attractive in person, than she

always desired to be. She had the sustaining consciousness that she could at any time put herself beyond the reach of the annoyance by marrying one of the least objectionable of the men who were ready to marry her. But this was an extreme measure, the consequences of which would environ her for life. Therefore she deferred taking it, and so she was a perfectly unfettered and heart-whole Laura Davis, who came sailing up to the group, composed of Mrs. Poynter and the twin brothers St. Austle, that night on the little Lynmouth esplanade.

The two parties stopped simultaneously as they recognised each other, for both the St. Austles knew Mr. Davis, and though Mrs. Poynter was a stranger to the Davis family she felt that it would be

doing an ungracious thing to walk on alone. She was a woman who never did an ungracious thing of *malice prepense*, and she was too true a gentlewoman to do one inadvertently. So now she stood by with a little look of interest on her face that Guy thought wonderfully fascinating, while the old acquaintances greeted one another.

Laura had never suspected the little *ruse* which Sir Walter had practised upon her years ago, and so greeted him now with the unfeigned cordial pleasure which she had always felt in the society of Guy's handsome, rich brother. She was very glad to see Guy again, still it seemed more in the proper order of things that Guy should improve the occasion conversationally with Robert and his wife,

and that she (Laura) should show Sir Walter that she felt kindly towards him still, though he was no longer her future brother-in-law. The pretty woman hovering so unaggressively in the background did not give her a moment's uneasiness. She presumed it was Lady St. Austle, and began to wonder "if there were any children."

"How odd it is to meet *here*," she said, drawing her snow-white feather boa closer round her throat and lovely chin; "it's quite like a story-book meeting, and shows that fact *is* stranger than fiction after all!"

"Don't see the oddness of it myself; if one meets someone else, it must be *somewhere* you know! Why not here as well as in the Row, or equatorial Africa, or

under the Pyramids, or at Margate, or——?”

“Don’t, *don’t* suggest such a horrible trysting place as Margate,” Laura interrupted, sending a well conceived and executed shiver through her pretty frame. “Who ever goes there? I’m sure you never did?”

“On the contrary, I know and love my Margate well. Before I allow you to disparage it, you must prove to me that you know it better than I do.”

“You always did talk nonsense,” she replied, with gentle vivacity. Then she made one step nearer to him and whispered :

“Won’t you introduce me to Lady St. Austle?”

There would have been an embarrassing pause for a moment had Sir Walter been a

shade less self-possessed than he was. He made no attempt to explain, he merely took Mrs. Poynter into the conversation, and made her understand the situation by saying :

“Mrs. Poynter, let me introduce Miss Davis to you—an old acquaintance of mine and Guy’s.”

The ladies bowed, and Mrs. Poynter held out her hand. For half a second Laura hesitated to take it, then, reflecting that Mrs. Poynter “might be mashed on Sir Walter just as reasonably as on Guy,” she took the extended hand dubiously.

“We were arranging an excursion for to-morrow when we met you,” Sir Walter went on, addressing everybody in his vivaciously casual way. “Watersmeet—or the Valley of Rocks——”

"I have seen them both," Mrs. Davis cut in shrilly; "it's so kind of you wanting to include *us* in your party, Sir Walter, but I do like fresh scenes, and having been to Watersmeet and the Valley of Rocks only a day or two ago, I should prefer a change."

"Do wait till you're invited before you refuse to go," her husband mumbled to her reprovingly in an undertone, which Sir Walter considerately drowned by loudly proclaiming that for "all of them to go to Barnstaple next day would be the proper thing to do."

"We can get a four-in-hand I know in Lynton—a char-a-banc, or waggonette will do for us. I'll drive you, if you'll confidently trust yourself to me, Mrs. Davis? and," here he turned to Mrs. Poynter,

“we can pick out our tandem ourselves, instead of relying on the livery-stableman’s judgment, d’ye see? So we distinctly score by going to Barnstaple to-morrow. The Valley of Rocks and Watersmeet must wait.”

She glanced instinctively at Guy before she replied. He was looking at her with an air of pleasurable anxious expectancy. “Perhaps he would like to make up this party for this very pretty woman,” she thought, and though there was a tightening of her heartstrings at the bare idea, she said cordially :

“Each plan of yours seems better than the last, Sir Walter.”

A rumour had reached her through some friendly female channel that Guy had at one time—before he knew her—got himself

into an entanglement with a young lady whom his friends did not like him to marry. There had not been a shadow of discredibility in the rumour, as far as he was concerned. Discredit very rarely does attach to a man who breaks off a matrimonial engagement, for it is the women who give the verdict, and they invariably find extenuating circumstances in the case of a man who perjures himself and breaks a promise to one of their own sex. They say, "She was not suited to him, and when he found that out, poor fellow! what was there for him to do but to break it off before the irrevocable words were spoken that would have chained them together for life?" Or, "Well! poor girl! I pity almost as much as I *despise* her; but what will you have when a girl shows a man that she is ready to jump down his

throat? He was impulsive, poor fellow! but *she* ought to have known better. He has broken it off in the most honourable way. His income and prospects do not justify him in marrying, he says, and she ought to be grateful to him for leaving her free."

If it is suggested to one of these tolerantly prudent ones that the man, being neither a congenital idiot, nor an habitual drunkard, must have known at the time of his proposal to the unreasonably aggrieved girl what his present means and future prospects were, the answer is ready:

"Oh! I don't say that he is entirely free from blame. But if she had any sense at all she must have seen that he proposed more from a sense of duty than anything else. The truth is, the girls of the present day are too ready to jump at any offer;

they don't stay to consider whether it is made in earnest or not."

These and a hundred similar speeches had been made by the female friends of both parties, when it had become known that Guy St. Austle's engagement with Laura Davis had come to an end. But when Marian Poynter had heard of it she did not endorse one of these sentiments, either verbally or in thought; and this night, when she saw Laura for the first time, she felt that it must have been terribly hard for Guy to have lost the right to call such a beauty his own.

"She seems very sweet and tractable too," Mrs. Poynter thought, as she watched the lovely aunt, forbearingly and without remonstrating, submit to being lugged about, and interrupted every few seconds,

by a pushing and aggressive little nephew of four. Then a thrill of pleasure passed through the matured woman's frame. "He did not know me when he fell in love with Miss Davis, nor when he fell out of love with her either. I have nothing with which to reproach either him or myself," she thought.

They had left the little esplanade, with its carefully-preserved Rhenish tower, behind them, and were sauntering up the village street, through which the river leaps and gurgles. Mrs. Davis was explaining that they had only come down to Lynmouth for the evening. The Valley of Rocks Hotel, at Lynton, was their head-quarters.

"Lynmouth would have been better, as far as getting to the sea quickly is concerned, and of course it's cheaper than

Lynton; but Robert and I are not the people to balance expense against health, and I always like a height better than a valley," Mrs. Davis said, as they all pulled up for a few moments at the wicket-gate which leads into the garden of Gothic Cottage.

The little four-year-old nephew had relinquished his hold on Laura's dress, and taking advantage of the slight diversion his mother's speech was making, had run in through the garden and open front door to Mrs. Poynter's sitting-room. In another moment he reappeared triumphantly, brandishing a heavily-framed panel photograph.

"I rooshed in after a cat, and I found *you* man on the table," the child said, ingenuously, holding Guy St. Austle's likeness well up to view under the electric light.

CHAPTER V.

THE LYN'S LULLABY.

THERE was a slight sensation in the little group, some being moved to anger and some to mirth, by little Bob Davis's inopportune method of springing his discovery upon them. For the electric light revealed the features of Guy St. Austle, admirably reproduced by that skilled Dublin photographer, who has learnt the great art of letting well alone, and not touching up his portraits out of all resemblance to their originals.

Among those who were angry was the child's mother ; and the reproofs she admi-

nistered to her offspring made a wholesome diversion.

“You are very, *very* naughty, Bobby. You have taken what does not belong to you, and that is *stealing*. You shall not have any cream to-night, and you shall have to say another verse of your hymn. I am shocked at you. Speak to him, Robert—make him feel his fault.”

“Dear little man! He only brought the picture out to amuse us,” Mrs. Poynter interfered. “I think it was very clever of him to see the likeness to Mr. St. Austle in a moment.”

“To take away a thing that does not belong to you is *stealing*,” Bobby’s mother harped on. “I am shocked—*shocked*—that a child of mine should have been guilty of such an act. Won’t you reprove him, Robert?”

“He has been reproved enough surely, hasn’t he?” Sir Walter put in. Then he hoisted the little boy up on his shoulder and volunteered to be Bobby’s horse as far as the Lyndale Hotel, where a carriage was waiting to convey the Davis party up to Lynton.

It was really a very immaterial and unimportant thing in itself—this incident of Bobby’s unearthing and displaying Guy’s photograph; but it had a marked and important effect on the manner of several of the actors in this little drama this night, and influenced them more afterwards than would have seemed credible to them.

To Laura Davis it was a revelation. She had gone on for years thinking of Guy St. Austle as a man who had been declined by her for obvious and sensible reasons, but

who was still in love with, and “cut up,” at losing her. To discover suddenly that he had given a portrait of himself to another woman, and further that this other woman carried the portrait about with her, was mortifying. She was too sweet-tempered, too lymphatic, and too cautious a woman to make a fuss about the inevitable. But she was too vain and feminine altogether not to desire to resume her empire over his heart now that she saw signs of that heart’s wandering into the keeping of another woman.

It never occurred to her that the photograph might have been bought by Mrs. Poynter, and that Guy might be absolutely innocent of the offence of its being in her possession.

Laura was a singularly unobservant woman, and also a singularly ill-read one.

She saw things that were right in front of her, and took an interest in the topics that were discussed in her brother's house. Though she had always gone on liking Guy better than any other man who had ever approached her, she had never been inspired to read either his books or his newspaper articles. Though she had heard that he had become what people called a celebrity, it had not flashed upon her that he had a certain market value for photographers. When she went up to town from her home at Norwood, her whole time was given to and her attention engrossed by millinery and dressmaking cares.

The only shop windows before which she paused, spell-bound, were those in which exquisite hued silks and satins and a hundred other marvellous textured materials

were displayed in billowing folds. Even the subtly simple arrangements of magnificent flowers and ferns in the fashionable florists' windows were powerless to attract and detain her for more than a minute. Her "brother had equally good orchids and every other kind of flower that the florists had," she was wont to say, "but such dress materials were unknown in Norwood." So it was that she had never noticed Guy's photograph among the other lions, great and small, which are on view for public adulation in Regent Street. She longed now to see more of Guy, and to find out if it were possible that he had transferred the love he had once offered her to a woman who "must be a good deal older and not nearly as good-looking as I am," she thought, and a gentle feeling of vexation

stole over her when they came up to the waiting carriage by the Lyndale Hotel and she knew that in a moment or two they must part.

But Fate and Sir Walter favoured her. When Mrs. Davis had settled herself in the carriage, and surrounded herself with her children, leaving little room for the others, Sir Walter inveighed against the cruelty of letting even the elephantine animal that was between the shafts drag them all up such a hill.

“Guy and I want a bit of a stretch, Miss Davis; if you and your brother will walk up to Lynton, perhaps you'll let us walk with you?”

Before Laura could speak, Mrs. Davis, who already had visions of Laura ensnaring the baronet, settled it.

“By all means walk up, Robert; we really are too large a party for the poor horse. The Valley of Rocks Hotel, driver! I shall only say *au revoir* to you, gentlemen.”

She drove off with her little flock, and the others strolled slowly up the steep ascent, Mr. Davis walking ahead with Sir Walter and the pair who had been lovers bringing up the rear.

He knew she was going to say something about the photograph, and experienced a sensation of grim contempt for himself for shrinking from telling her the truth, which was that he had not given his likeness to Mrs. Poynter. With what pride he would have avowed the fact if he had done so! As it was, he feared that Mabel might only have bought it because

he was a good deal talked about just now, and not for any sweeter reason.

"It was very good-natured of Mrs. Poynter to take Bobby's part. She couldn't have liked his bringing it out; you neither of you could have liked it," she began softly.

"Oh! I don't know. I think I was rather pleased at the little chap's smartness. He must have a quick eye to have spotted the likeness at once. How old is he?"

"Four or five," Laura said hastily. She did not mean to waste time in talking about her little nephew. "Has Mrs. Poynter been here long?"

"I don't know."

"Have you been here long?"

"Only a day or two."

“I suppose you knew she was here ? ”

“Indeed, I did nothing of the kind,”
Guy replied impatiently. He was beginning to get tired of being catechised. But Laura, as has been said, was not gifted with keen perceptions.

“Then you met by chance. How odd ! ”

“Do you think so ? Just turn round and look back at Lynmouth ; it seems to be hung with diamonds, doesn’t it ? ”

“You mean the electric light ? Yes, very pretty. I can’t help thinking it funny that you should have come down here and found by chance a lady who carries a big portrait of you about with her. Or perhaps she is a greater friend of your brother’s than she is of yours ? Is that the case ? ”

“No ; Walter met her for the first time in his life to-night.”

“Really ! I thought they must be very intimate, as he was arranging to drive her out in a tandem.”

“He’s rather an impulsive fellow, and very anxious to give everyone he comes across pleasure. Mrs. Poynter is an old and highly-valued friend of mine. She has never seen Porlock, and so Walter asked her to do us the honour of letting us show it to her, but I don’t like the tandem business on that road.”

“You are going with them, then ?”

“I am.”

“But he spoke of a dog-cart ; you’ll have to sit behind.”

“I don’t at all mind taking a back seat in such company,” he said laughingly.

“And I prefer a back seat on a coach ; I get so giddy if I look down on the horses. When we go to Barnstaple to-morrow will you take care that I have a seat where I can’t see the horses going down those dreadful hills ?”

“That I will !”

“And—Guy, have you quite forgiven me ; will you be as friendly as ever with me again ?”

“I have nothing to forgive ; you were quite right, and I *am* as friendly as ever with you,” he protested earnestly. He had no intention of being re-subjugated by Laura, but he certainly did not wish her to suffer any pangs of remorse on account of her renunciation of him long ago.

“Then will you do me a favour and look after me on the coach to-morrow ? I

am really dreadfully nervous, and I shan't enjoy the scenery or the air or anything if I feel that I have to take care of myself."

"Certainly," he said, but there was no enthusiasm in his tone. Laura was lovely to look at, but he could not go on looking at her for twenty miles, and he felt intuitively that her conversational powers had not improved since those days when her commonplaces had nearly bored him to death.

"Walter will score again as he did at our birth," Guy thought, with mixed feelings of humour and annoyance, as he pictured Mrs. Poynter on the box-seat amusing and interesting his brother all along the road, while Laura poured her platitudes about the steepness of the hills into his ears.

They had reached the hotel by this time, and with brotherly forethought and zeal, Mr. Davis would not hear of the two men going back to Lynmouth till they had been hospitably entertained.

“We’ll have a game of billiards first,” he said, “and then it will be the time for devilled bones and champagne. This sea-air ought to make us all hungry.”

So the brothers stayed for two or three hours, and Laura lulled all suspicion to rest in Guy’s soul of any desire to recapture him. She was so unaffectedly good - tempered and unembarrassed, so easily and perfectly friendly, and nothing more, that he began to accuse himself of having underrated her intellect.

“She’s a lovely woman, that Laura Davis ; after all, Guy, you might have done

a great deal worse. Her brother seems to have struck oil with that business of his from what he was telling me."

"*You* wouldn't look at her after a week alone with her, and I wouldn't give myself more than a month to contemplate her continually, even if I were in love with her looks still."

"The other one has——"

"What do you mean by the other one?"
Guy interrupted sharply.

"I meant Mrs. Poynter, but I see I made a mistake," Sir Walter laughed out gaily, but Guy answered unsmilingly :

"My dear fellow, when you've seen a little more of Mrs. Poynter, you will understand that she could never be the 'other' one to any man she liked ; she would always be 'the' one !"

Sir Walter whistled for a minute or two, then he said : “ Coincidences strike one as being shaped by the finger of fate very often, don’t they ? ”

“ You mean that it’s strange the Davises should have turned up here just now ? ”

“ I might have thought it strange if Mrs. Davis hadn’t let out to me that she saw in the last number of *Entre Nous* that ‘ Mr. Guy St. Austle, the well-known novelist and journalist, proposed spending a month at Lynmouth.’ ”

“ But—Laura didn’t know ? ” Guy questioned anxiously. He wanted to go on thinking well of Laura. The idea that she who had calm-bloodedly hurled him adrift in the days of his poverty should now hunt him in the days of his prosperity, was repugnant to him.

“No, she didn’t. Mrs. Davis said ‘Laura was so sweet-tempered and acquiescent, that she never enquired into their plans or interfered with them.’ So, they came without letting Laura know you were here. But you understand! the ‘finger of fate’ has nothing at all to do with the thing. I say! that’s a jolly good likeness of you that Master Bobby brought forth.”

“Capital one; it’s not touched up out of all resemblance to me. It’s just as I am.”

“Mrs. Poynter must value it highly to encumber herself with it while she’s knocking about. When did you have it taken?—when did you give it to her?”

“Had it taken about six months ago—didn’t I send you one?—and never gave it to her at all. I’m off to roost now, the

ripple of the two Lyns is a rattling good lullaby you'll find. Awfully glad you've come, old boy, and, if you'll have me, I'll go down with you and have a look at the old place when we're tired of this."

All the thoughts that filtered through Sir Walter St. Austle's brain this night before the ripple of the two Lyns lulled him to sleep need not be chronicled here, but some of them ran something after this fashion :

"There's no doubt about it, a fellow might do a thousand times worse than marry that lovely woman. That brother of hers must be a sharp chap to have made such a splendid investment of the fortune her father left her. Don't see myself why Guy wants a wife with brains for he has enough and to spare of his

own. He'd find her dollars more useful in every-day life than any amount of cleverness or culture; and he won't be able to go on for ever writing about love and war. But every man ought to choose his own wife for himself. I know I mean to do it, if ever I do marry."

The idea of marriage seemed more possible, not to say harmonious, to him this night than it had ever done before. Perhaps this was due to the soothing influence of the ripple of the two Lyncs.

When the rest of the party went on and left Mrs. Poynter to enter her lodgings alone, she was conscious of feeling a very solitary woman. On no account whatever would she have allowed Guy St. Austle to enter them with her, and try to cheer her

up with a chat for an hour or two about those old, dear, dangerous times when each knew, though neither had acknowledged, that they loved one another. But to see him walk off with another woman who had been dear to him once was a distinctly painful experience. It was no use reminding herself that he had got over his brief infatuation for Laura Davis before he had ever met her (Mabel Poynter). The fact remained that some of the love she prized so highly, though she was trying to chill and check it, had been frittered away on someone else. She was as generous as well as a sensible and sympathetic woman. She made no attempt to depreciate Laura's incontestable good looks; they were as patent to her as they were to the rest of the world who had the

privilege of beholding them. Nor did she do what many a brilliantly-clever woman makes the mistake of doing sometimes when the fangs of jealousy have her in their grip, disparage Laura's mental endowments namely, and incidentally reveal how inferior these are to the jealous one's own. But as she sat thinking deeply for hours, with her eyes rivetted on that likeness of Guy's, which seemed at moments to be vitalised by the lamp-light, she did question whether she would be justified in relinquishing Guy to what she felt his fate would be if he married an uncongenial wife.

“ But if I save him from such a fate, the day would come when he himself would raise John Poynter's ghost ; and when he did that, not even *my* love would be strong

enough to exorcise it and lay it finally to rest," she said with a sigh, as at last she rose and went up to her bedroom.

The windows were open, one looking into the little garden full now to overflowing with sweet-scented flowers, the other on to the deserted village street through which the Lyns run. As she leant out to take a last view for the night of the bounding little stream she saw a man standing against the opposite wall. She drew back confused but happier than she had been a minute previously, for she had recognised, and had been recognised by, Guy St. Austle.

His desire to "go to roost" had been overcome by a stronger craving to catch even a glimpse of the shadow of the woman he loved, and his craving had been more than satisfied, for he had looked straight into the

eyes that were the sweetest in all the world to him, and seen that they lightened with pleasure as they fell upon him.

“She is younger, much better-looking, above all she is not tainted in his eyes through ever having been possessed by another man!—but his last thoughts to-night will be of *me*,” Mabel Poynter thought as she laid her head on her pillow, “as mine God bless him! are of him.” And the ripple of the Lyn kindly set itself to these words, and to their music Mabel Poynter fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

LAURA IS REMINISCENT.

UNLIKE the professional coachmen, who when starting from Lynton to Barnstaple invariably suavely inquire of the gentlemen who have booked for the journey if "they wouldn't like to walk up the hill?" Sir Walter refused to start until each member of the party was settled in his or her place on or inside the coach.

They had with them a luncheon basket from "The Valley of Rocks" Hotel, that would have done credit even to Fortnum and Mason, and a couple of smart waiters kept guard over this and the lighter roadside refreshment hamper inside the coach.

The horses were good, upstanding, sturdy, broad-legged animals, who knew as much about going up and down hill as any horses in North Devon, and to say that accredits them with vast knowledge of the ups and downs of the road. Sir Walter as he took his seat in a way that showed he had the knowledge and the power of how to sit on the box, felt the exhilaration which is apt to be the portion of a man who sees four good horses in front of him and knows that he is able to hit under the bars his near leader without touching the noses or ears of the wheelers. Added to the buoyancy of spirit induced by this conviction, there was additional stimulus in the facts that the day was one of those rich ripe ones when the whole atmosphere seems to be surcharged with warmth and colour, and that

a woman, who was as well physically and mentally endowed as she was dressed, was sitting by his side.

His spirits were contagious ; at any rate, Guy had never heard Mabel laugh so loudly, merrily, and frequently as she did during this drive. He had kept his promise, planted Laura on a back seat, from whence she could see neither the horses nor the hills down which those horses trotted, and planted himself by her side. But nothing seemed likely to grow out of that planting. Laura had not got very much more to say for herself than she had in the old days when her chirpy chatterings had made him write himself down an ass for having proposed to her. Consequently silence set in at brief intervals, and Laura began to think she had been unwise in allowing her nerves

to take her so far away from the neighbourhood of Sir Walter, for his rattling voice and laugh was borne back to them upon the breeze continually.

The mature pair in the middle were perfectly happy in their own way, especially after the first halt was called, when they had done ten miles of the distance, for the horses to be watered and the human beings champagned. During this halt Guy climbed down and made his way to the front, where he had the pleasure of holding Mrs. Poynter's glass while she nibbled a biscuit, and Laura had a brief reversionary interest in Sir Walter's attentions.

"How merry you have been in front. I can't think how you can drive so well while you are talking and laughing so much. What has Mrs. Poynter been saying

to amuse you so much?" Laura began in half-affected pique.

"'Pon my word, I think I was laughing more at what I said myself than at what Mrs. Poynter said," Sir Walter replied candidly; "my sayings were neither very wise nor very witty, but they did duty for being one or the other. Very small change passes current easily on such a day and occasion as this. I'm afraid Guy has been neglecting his duty if he hasn't amused *you*."

"Oh! your brother never was much of a talker, and I'm afraid I shouldn't have amused him or made him laugh even if he had heard half I said, which I'm sure he didn't," Laura rejoined with sweet humility. "I am rather stupid, you know! When—when your brother and I knew

each other much better than we do now," she went on with a blush, "I used to try so *hard* to understand all he said that I used to tire myself out, and then I used to make mistakes and get hold of what he called the wrong end of the stick. It must be so nice to be quick like Mrs. Poynter is ; I'm sure she is, isn't she ? Listen at Guy now !" she added, lapsing under the influence of jealousy into the utterance of the once dearly familiar name, "he is talking fast enough to her."

"Let me get you another glass of champagne," Walter said, wisely evading giving an answer to the gently jealous plaint. "No! oh, you should, it will be hours before we get any lunch. You're looking after yourself, I hope, Davis? Time's up now, we must be getting along the road.

You've taken the worst seat on the coach, Miss Davis. What was Guy thinking about to put 'you here, where you can see nothing?"

"I wanted to sit where I couldn't see either the horses or the hills, it wasn't his fault," Laura explained eagerly ; but Sir Walter was out of ear-shot before she had finished her sentence. She was very lovely to look at, but he couldn't help feeling very glad that his lines were cast on the box-seat with Mrs. Poynter by his side, instead of in the rear with Laura.

"Poor Guy! he's rather in the dull back there, I think," he said complacently to Mrs. Poynter presently ; "she's awfully pretty and awfully sweet, but she's not exactly the companion I should choose for a wet day in a lone house."

“Is there anyone on earth that you would choose for a companion under such circumstances?” she said quickly, and before he could answer she went on, “I know if I had to endure the wet day in a lone house, books would be the only companions I could tolerate—the only ones that would find me tolerable.”

“Can you stand solitude?” he asked.

“Much better than I can society. I can people my solitude with memories and thoughts that are far more interesting to me than I find the majority of casual acquaintances.”

“What an awful pity it is that such a woman as you should prefer to live alone!” he remarked meditatively.

“I am alone here for my holiday, but—I do not live alone.”

She sighed as she spoke, thereby doing away with the momentary impression he had that the companion referred to must be her own child.

“No mother would look so glum about having the companionship of a kid of her own,” he thought as he glanced down admiringly at her shapely head and mobile face, and a gentle feeling of satisfaction pervaded his heart. Somehow or other he did not like to think of this woman as the mother of another man’s offspring. After all there were strong points of resemblance in the characters of these twin brothers.

It went against his own taste that he should feel so much curiosity concerning this woman and her manner of life, still he could not restrain the expression of it.

“Have you thought it necessary to start

a sheep-dog? Have you been compelled to throw that conventional sop to Mrs. Grundy?"

"Do you mean, have I an official companion? Indeed, at my staid age a sheep-dog, as you call it, would be a very unnecessary evil. My—my late husband's daughter lives with me; naturally, until she marries, she will share my home."

"She's lucky to have such a charming step-mother. Is she a child, girl, or woman?"

"A woman of twenty-three or four, and a very attractive one."

"Wonder she hasn't married before now!"

Mrs. Poynter's face grew scarlet for an instant, and if he had been looking at her he would have seen her eyes flash. The

next instant she had recovered her composure, and was saying calmly :

“It isn’t for want of being wooed that she is still unwed, but she is a very uncommon kind of girl.”

“Superior woman, eh?”

“No; not at least in the sense in which you are using the word ‘superior.’ She cares nothing for women’s rights, or the higher education of women; but on the other hand, she is far from being feebly feminine. I think most people would find her very interesting—men especially.”

“Pretty, eh?”

“Very! pretty and fascinating.”

“Do *you* find her very interesting?”

“I have had charge of her since her father died; one is naturally interested in one’s charge.”

“That means that you don’t love her,” Sir Walter thought, but he only said aloud :

“At any rate, you have interested me in your young lady. What is her name?”

“Ella.”

“Has Guy seen her.”

“What makes you ask that?” she said hastily and anxiously, and there was a touch of astonishment in his tone as he replied :

“Only because I wondered what he thought of her.”

“He has never seen her,” she said, with curious constraint. Then she added, with an effort, “He could only admire her ; he would be sure to do that.”

“Then you think I should be sure to admire her too ?”

“Not as Guy would—as Guy will if he ever sees her,” she said with a little vexed laugh. “How you have drawn me on to discuss a subject I rarely mention, because it is one to which I am unable to do justice!”

“I’m afraid I’ve been rather pertinacious not to say inquisitive. I’ll own up handsomely to it, and you’ll have to forgive me——”

“How glad I shall be when we sight Barnstaple,” she interrupted; “it will suggest something fresh to talk about—before I bore you hopelessly about Miss Poynter.”

“I don’t think you could bore a man even if you tried,” he said admiringly; but he added to himself, “But you would be so jealous of a fellow you loved that you’d

half harass yourself into your grave. What's the crux between her and Guy I wonder? He's got it badly enough, and she seems to think about him pretty much. Here we are at Barnstaple, Mrs. Poynter, and you haven't bored me a bit, far less 'hopelessly,' yet."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Davis's voice was heard saying, "do you know I've been asleep? This beautiful bracing air and lovely scenery has quite overcome me. I don't think I ever enjoyed a drive so much in my life."

"Now having got to Barnstaple, let us get out of it without a moment's delay and find a place to picnic in," Sir Walter directed, and presently they found themselves on a well-turfed, gently-sloping bank under some larches by the river.

“Walter had the luck of it again to-day,” Guy St. Austle said to Mrs. Poynter as he engineered her out of ear-shot of the others ; “I heard your voices the whole time. Happy Walter ! he had something to say and could say it to you.”

She stooped to pick a piece of meadow-sweet, and with her face concealed from him said :

“We started a subject in which he became interested, and about which I am naturally eloquent—my daughter.”

“Good Heavens ! your *daughter* !”

“My step-child I should have said. Yes. Mr. Poynter left his daughter in my charge. I have never mentioned her to you, have I ?”

“Never !” Guy said briefly. It was annoying to him that there was this other

hitherto unsuspected link between the dead man and herself. "You have confided more to Walter in the course of three hours than you have to me in the course of three years," he went on reproachfully.

"Your brother has a very frank way of finding out whatever he wants to know," she laughed, but though she spoke lightly she was conscious of depression. Quick to perceive everything that took place around her, she was especially quick to notice how any and everything affected Guy. He had winced under that first mention of John Poynter's daughter. "Will he wince more when he sees Ella? or what?" she thought uneasily, and a little pang shot through her soul at the prospect of Guy's seeing her late husband's daughter.

"I don't want Guy to hate anyone

belonging to me. I hope he won't hate Ella!" she said to herself excusingly.

Time did not fly that day at Barnstaple. The wrong people got together and clogged Time's wings. Moreover, even had Guy been able to secure Mrs. Poynter's unadulterated society, as he sought to do, there would still have been little satisfaction in the achievement. For in feeling they had come to a certain dangerous pass about each other, and in seeming they did not dare to approach this point, or rather they did not know how to do it, for not to "dare" was a phrase that did not obtain in the vocabulary of either of them.

Strolling about the beautifully situated, picturesque, and exquisitely clean old town in the golden mellowed light of a perfect

summer afternoon, they found themselves on the bridge on which a mob of robbed, cheated, and consequently infuriated, farmers once cornered, and thought they had caught, Tom Faggus.

“There must have been a lot of good about that fellow; he had the pluck to put his roan at the parapet with a drop beyond it of forty feet down into the river. It must have been fine sport to see the men he’d left behind him throwing their stones after him and his strawberry roan as they swam to shore.”

“I should have wished him so well if I’d seen him do it, I believe I’d have thrown myself in the way of the stones rather than that he should be hit, Sir Walter,” Mrs. Poynter said, looking at Guy though she addressed his brother.

“Do you admire mere brute courage so much?”

“There must have been something more than mere ‘brute courage’ about Faggus or his roan mare wouldn’t have been so devoted to him. I think the prettiest story I ever read is that of the mare kicking down the stable door, rushing out, and fighting the constables with teeth and hoofs who were taking away her master.”

“I fail to see anything pretty in the fiction, and if it was a fact I should heartily regret that the mare’s misguided enthusiasm for a villain didn’t meet with its just reward. Faggus ought to have been hanged and his mare shot. I am a man of law and order. According to my idea, whoever breaks the one or disturbs the other should be punished for the commonweal.”

“The man was hanged and the mare was shot!” Mrs. Poynter said thoughtfully. “Poor Winnie! she shared the fate that befalls every living creature who loves some one else better than itself. If she had stayed in her stall and gone on eating her oats philosophically when her master whistled for her, instead of rushing out and fighting for him, she might have lived to a ripe old age.”

“And never been mentioned in song or story as she is now; distinctly the strawberry roan scored by her action. Unselfish devotion that may be extremely detrimental to themselves, is what everything feminine ought to be trained to feel and to display.”

“You don’t mean that surely, do you, Sir Walter?” Laura asked wistfully. She

was beginning to think his gaiety a more attractive thing than that gravity of Guy's which was apt at times to merge into sternness. But if he meant to demand devotion that might be detrimental to her from the woman he might finally elect to the honoured post of Lady St. Austle, then there would be serious drawbacks to the position in Laura's estimation. Not all the infectious gaiety of manner in which he was such a proficient, could compensate her for "having everlastingly to put herself out of the way for him," she reflected as she smilingly refused Mrs. Poynter's offer to change places with her, Laura, on the homeward drive. But when half that homeward drive was accomplished, Laura was admitting to herself that Walter was more congenial to her than Guy. She felt

herself more on a par mentally with the man who made jokes which she scarcely grasped, and laughed heartily at them himself, than with Guy, who spoke seriously of things of which she had no conception with the evident expectation that she would follow him, which she couldn't.

“You don't think your brother *really* meant that he thought everything feminine ought to be trained to show unselfish devotion, whether it may hurt them or not, do you?” she asked at last after a prolonged pause, during which Guy had been condemning his brother as an empty-headed ass for being mirthful and talkative about that well-worn theme—himself.

“Walter often says what he doesn't mean when he wants to be amusing; he certainly would never exact devotion that

might be detrimental to the one who exhibited it from any one man or woman. He's the most unselfish fellow that ever lived," he added warmly, regretting that he had called Walter "an empty-headed ass" in his thoughts two minutes before.

"He was telling my brother last night that we ought to go on into Cornwall, and asking us all to pay him a visit if we did. But we're such a troop, aren't we?—unless Bessie decides to send the children and nurses home, or leave them here. He said he should invite Mrs. Poynter too; do you think she will go?"

"Can't possibly say." The thought of showing Mrs. Poynter the old home that was so dear to him was very pleasant to him, though Walter was the master of it, and she would be Walter's guest.

“You would be one of the party I suppose, wouldn’t you, Mr. St. Austle?”

“Yes, I haven’t been there for a long time; I’m longing to see the old place again.”

“I have the photographs you gave me of the entrance-hall and drawing-room still. It must be a beautiful place, and such a pretty name too, Trehearne Towers——”

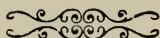
“Trelyn Towers!” corrected Guy.

“Trelyn! well that’s just as pretty, isn’t it?” She was quite approving in her manner.

“Good God! I loved this woman once,” thought Guy, “and all the time she was thinking it would be pleasant to be the mistress of the house with a pretty name.”

In thinking this he did Laura an injustice. Her interest in the home of his forefathers

had been partly feigned to please him in the old days. Her forgetfulness of its proper name was a genuine thing now, when she met and wished to please him again, for she was, as she had a habit of admitting, a very stupid woman, who had little or no memory of anything outside the margin of her daily life.



CHAPTER VII.

A YOUNG AVENGER.

“MAY I come and see you to-morrow? it would be so kind of you to let me?” Laura asked in a sudden access of intensely friendly feeling towards Mrs. Poynter, when the party were separating that night.

“Remember we start for our tandem drive to Porlock at half-past ten,” Sir Walter put in remindingly.

“Oh! I forgot that plan,” Laura said, blushing vividly. She had been brought up in rather a rigid school of surface respectability, and she could hardly conceive the idea that a woman who looked so proper as Mrs. Poynter would take a long drive in the

dashing style which surrounds a tandem like an atmosphere, alone with a couple of young men, unless she were engaged to one of them.

Mrs. Poynter frowned thoughtfully, not angrily. She fathomed Laura's meaning at once, and recognised the justice of it. "Even at my age I have no right to do this," she thought. Then she said (and her answer was addressed to the brothers as much as to Laura):

"I had not forgotten it, but I don't think I ever heartily assented to it. I shall ask them to excuse me, and so I shall be able and very glad to receive you to-morrow, Miss Davis."

"But I don't feel a bit like excusing you; I've secured the tandem, and don't mean to be defrauded of the object for which I

secured it," Sir Walter put in jestingly, but with real earnestness of purpose. "Come, Guy, speak up; we won't be thrown over by Mrs. Poynter in this way, will we?"

"I like the idea of your pleasing yourself in every way, and I don't like the idea of your being driven tandem along the edge of a cliff that's only protected by a little railing that is rather an ornamental feature than a protective measure," Guy said, quickly, addressing Mrs. Poynter and ignoring Walter's running fire of protesting words. He had gleaned from a glance at Mrs. Poynter that she did not wish to become the object of his brother's marked attentions, and though he felt hopeless about her himself, he liked protecting her from any other man.

"That being settled, I shall look for you

to-morrow, Miss Davis—" Mrs. Poynter was beginning, when Mrs. Davis struck in :

"I hope you will all dine with us to-morrow at eight, Mrs. Poynter. The gentlemen will be home by that time from Porlock, and they can paint the lily as much as they like, and try and make you feel sorry for what you will have missed. We none of us know either Porlock or the road to it, so we can't edit their statements about the beauties of either."

This was a speech of unparalleled length and perspicuity from Mrs. Davis ; but she had been inspired by her husband to make it in a brief, emphatic whisper, while the argument about Mrs. Poynter's going or not going to Porlock was being carried on. She was very apt at acting on her husband's hints and instructions. She had

been the recipient of many of them, and she had found that if acted upon implicitly they always tended to their worldly welfare.

“ ‘Half a loaf is better than no bread’ ; my brother and I accept your invitation with pleasure, Mrs. Davis, but I still feel that *you* have behaved rather badly to us,” he added, turning to Mrs. Poynter.

She could afford to smile, as she did, good temperedly, at his disapproval, for it was clear to her that Guy thought she had done right.

Laura Davis arrived at Gothic Cottage the following day, looking deliciously crisp and cool in an azure-hued cambric. She had not been actuated by any particular motive in asking to see more of Mrs.

Poynter. She was only conscious of a vague desire to find out if there was anything between the widow, who was older and not nearly as pretty as herself, and either of the two brothers. She was also quite willing to exchange the companionship of her sister-in-law and the children for that of this stranger, who had seen so much more of life in its attractive phases than she herself had done. Placid as she was, there were times when Laura grew rather tired of the comfortably luxurious dulness of her brother's house. To make a friend of Mrs. Poynter might turn out to be an advantageous thing. "She might like to have a girl to stay with her sometimes in the season, it would be as nice for her as for me," Laura, who knew nothing of the existence of the step-daughter,

thought, as she glided down the Cliff railway and made her way to Gothic Cottage.

She was so early in the field that Mrs. Poynter had not finished either her letters or her breakfast. But there was nothing discomposing about Laura. She was neither aggressive, nor apologetic. She made no laborious efforts to explain away or account for her premature presence, but just told the truth and took the offered coffee and toast in a simple, straightforward way that was characteristic of her.

“Getting up early always makes me hungry, and I got up quite early to see the St. Austles start in their tandem. They looked so nice, and so much alike sitting there side by side. I don’t wonder that you wished to go with them. What made you alter your mind?”

There was not the shadow of impertinence in this bold question. Laura had no intention of being intrusively curious, and Mrs. Poynter was neither secretive nor suspicious.

“I was hurried into accepting Sir Walter’s invitation by that powerful, carry-all-before-it manner of his. I had repented it at leisure during our drive yesterday, and I was very much obliged to you for giving me an excuse for getting out of it.”

“When I heard you were going with them I thought you must be engaged to one or other of them. One would think that naturally, wouldn’t one?” Laura questioned earnestly.

“I am not engaged to either of them, so for their sakes as well as my own I am

glad I didn't go with them, as our action would have been so—so *foolishly* misconstrued."

"You would have thought the same thing if you had heard they were going to take *me*."

"I am a much older woman than you are, moreover my position is different. I am a matron of many years' standing."

Laura nodded her head slowly in assent, and looked thoughtfully at her hostess.

"Still I am glad I didn't go," Mrs. Poynter went on lightly.

"And I am glad too—as you're not engaged to one of them. I shouldn't have liked to hear things said that Robert and Anna would have been sure to say. They are both *very* particular, and they would have blamed the St. Austles just as much

as they would you, if they had thought they were carrying on with you without being engaged."

"But now the minds of your family and yourself will be set at rest," Mrs. Poynter said, laughing.

They rose as she spoke, and Laura's eyes fell upon a long, low table on which were arranged Mrs. Poynter's writing-case, several bowls of roses and two or three photographs, but Guy's was not among the latter she noticed with some satisfaction.

"You don't give Mr. St. Austle's photograph a place of honour on your writing-table?"

"I haven't it on my writing-table."

"Oh! but who is this?" Laura exclaimed, picking up a framed miniature on ivory.

"What a wonderful face! Is it a fancy

picture, or a likeness of anyone you know?"

"It's a likeness of my step-daughter, Ella Poynter, done by herself."

"Does it flatter her?"

"You will be able to judge soon. I have heard from her this morning. She wishes to come and join me here."

"How clever she must be to paint anything so beautiful as *that*."

"I have no doubt you will see some more of her work when she comes down," Mrs. Poynter replied, with a scarcely perceptible shiver; "when it's a labour of love it's exquisite, as in this instance." She pointed to the miniature.

"Has she ever painted you?"

"Yes," Mrs. Poynter replied, laughing again.

“Was that a labour of love?—is it exquisite?” Laura persisted, and Mrs. Poynter seemed to be weary of the subject, for she answered abruptly:

“She painted what she saw in my face, no doubt, but the result is not pleasing.”

“I wonder if she would make a good picture of Mr. St. Austle—has she ever painted men?”

“Never from life that I’m aware of,” said Mrs. Poynter, answering the last portion of Laura’s speech only. “Now shall we go and idle away an hour or two by the Glen Lyn falls? Shall we take books, or rely upon one another for entertainment?”

“I like talking better than reading, but I’ll take a book if you like,” Laura agreed amiably. So Guy St. Austle’s latest work was put into her hands and she dived into

its pages at intervals through the hours of the morning.

“I wonder who all these people are? Do you think they’re *real*, do you think he will ever put you or me in a book, Mrs. Poynter? I shouldn’t like it at all.”

“If he does you’ll never know it; we none of us see ourselves as others see us, you know.”

“But other people would know it and they would be sure to tell me of it, especially if I were put in disagreeably, you know,” Laura urged with more acumen than Mrs. Poynter had given her credit for possessing. Then there was silence for a few minutes. For the one woman it was filled with anxious, half remorseful, half resentful thoughts. For the other, it was filled with vain conjectures as to why Mrs.

Poynter and her step-daughter didn't like one another. "Can it be about Guy, I wonder?" she thought. "Stupid, some women! if a man likes you best he tells you so, and if he likes someone else better than you, what is the use of worrying about it?" It was a happy philosophy, and Laura not only preached it to herself, but practised it pretty faithfully.

"I feel as if we had become great friends," Laura said kindly when they were parting that morning; "it will be so nice our all going down to Cornwall together, and when we go home again I shall always feel that I've someone to go to when you're in town."

"My step-daughter's appearance on the scene will probably alter all my plans. Ella very rarely asks me to do anything for

her, when she does I feel bound to do it. She may not wish to go to Trelyn Towers."

"Oh, I hope she will," Laura said fervently. "She might paint us all."

"She might," Mrs. Poynter rejoined dryly.

* * * * *

It made quite a little sensation among them all that night at dinner, this promised visit from Mrs. Poynter's hitherto unknown step-daughter. Mrs. Poynter had naturally not carried the miniature in her pocket, nor did she reply very eloquently to the enquiries about Ella. But Laura was rapturous in her description of the "sweet little dark face and purple eyes with the curly lashes."

"Aren't you longing to see her?" she

enquired of Guy, and he replied carelessly but truthfully, "Not a bit of it."

He had discovered that Mabel did not wish her to come.

Meantime the cause of this excitement was quietly and quickly making her preparations to join the one woman in the world for whom she had as hearty a dislike as she had an unmitigated contempt. She had every reason to think herself well justified in nursing both these feelings. For something had transpired at the time of her father's death which made her vow girlish vengeance against the woman whom she had never liked as her father's wife. Why this dislike should have intensified from that time Mabel Poynter did not know, for she was ignorant of the existence of the weapons which Ella meant to use

against her in the fulness of time, when a good crushing opportunity arose. The girl thought the opportunity had arisen now, and was coming down to Lynmouth with her weapons in her travelling trunk, prepared to use them without compunction.

She sharpened them by recalling the splenetic look, and peevishly suspicious expression and manner which had so hurt and pained her in her father during the last few months of his life. The girl had adored her father to the end, and had been adored by him in return till that unwanted Mabel had intervened to make him first selfishly happy, and towards the end selfishly miserable. Ella had resented his happiness with her mother's successor to a certain degree. But this resentment was as nothing to that which she felt when she

discovered that the unwanted woman had made her father's last days a torment to him.

“She shall be punished for it!” she had sworn, as she knelt in the room in which her father had died the day after the funeral, after having gathered together a bundle of his carelessly-kept papers. “I don't know how, or when, or why! but she shall be punished, by me.”

She was not a dramatic young person by any means, the one who took this task of vengeance upon herself. But she was an unfortunate combination of artistic temperament, meagre education, and warm heart. Her one great gift was that of portraiture, and though she often failed in the draughtsmanship of the accessories, she never failed in expression or colouring.

She painted what she saw with rare feeling, exquisite delicacy, fidelity, and subtle sympathy. But in painting what she saw she frequently painted what her sitters had not meant her to see.

Perhaps she had done this in the case of her step-mother, as the latter told Laura Davis that "Ella painted what she saw in my face, but the result is not pleasing."

"She hasn't dared to refuse to have me, though she hates my going there," Miss Poynter said gleefully to herself, as she read the few lines in which Mrs. Poynter agreed to receive her at Lynmouth. She had packed her trunks before she had received the letter, but now she raised the lid of an unstrapped one and laid several pencilled and painted studies of a head on the top of everything else

“I shall ask Mabel Poynter to undo my boxes for me, and the first thing she will see will be these studies of Guy St. Austle, head and face! That will make her shiver, for she’ll think it’s love of his good looks that has made me take the trouble to make so many sketches of him. I *love* to see her looking vexed and anxious, and not daring all the time to ask me why I do it. Perhaps she’ll send him away before I get there! If she does I shall feel sure that *he is the man*. If he *is*!—poor papa!—poor darling, shamefully-used papa!—you will know wherever you are that your little daughter has not forgotten you and loves you dearly still.”

Ella carried out her programme to the letter. There was scant courtesy, and no cordiality whatever in the way in which

she greeted the woman on whom she had in a measure forced herself. Nevertheless, she made that woman useful.

“Come to my room with me, Mrs. Poynter, and help me to undo my boxes,” she said, with the slight imperiousness, not to say insolence, which had characterised her manner to Mrs. Poynter ever since her father’s death. And when Mabel lifted the cover and saw the various profiles, three-quarter and full faces of Guy St. Austle, that were scattered about, Ella observed scornfully :

“Been at my favourite work you see ? I am never tired of making sketches of that man, for I fancy he and I will have something to say to one another one day.”

“That day may be sooner than you

think, for 'that man' is staying at Lynmouth now."

"I knew it," Ella said coldly. Her step-mother looked up at her quickly, and Ella thought she read fear in the glance, fear and distrust.

It is so essentially human to see in the face of one whom we suspect the reflection of our suspicion So-and-so, has wronged us, we think, in some way, large or small. Accordingly, when we meet probably unconscious So-and-so, we read confusion or defiance according to what we have decided he is feeling, in his totally expressionless gaze. We look at him with angry embarrassment unintentionally, and as in a looking-glass we see the look repeated on his face. Or we deem him so hopelessly regardless of the debt he owes us, that

we glance at him with careless scorn ! and lo ! “careless scorn” lurks in the pose of his haughtily averted head, and under the lowered lids of his scornfully averted eyes. In fact, when we scowl at the world it scowls back at us promptly. When we doubt it, it doubts us with tenfold force. When we lie in wait to catch it tripping, it has us by the heels in no time. When we loathe and would shun it, it pays back our loathing with ten per cent. interest, and resigns us without so much as holding a finger out to hold us back.

But if we “love” our portion of it, it loves us with regal largeness in return.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAURA "CLINCHES IT!"

"WHY has she come? You say she has never liked you. (There must be something wrong about her, if that's the case.)" This last sentence parenthetically to himself.

"She has a right to share my home, wherever it may be."

"Honestly, Mrs. Poynter, I must tell you that I don't think your step-daughter bears any one of our party any particular goodwill."

"But she knows nothing, absolutely nothing, about any one member of it, with the exception of myself, and I certainly

am not conscious of having deserved her ill-will. Believe me, Sir Walter, there is nothing but girlish, almost childish, petulance beneath that suppressed manner which irritates you so much. I came in her way and took her place as mistress of her father's house, when it was the height of her childish ambition to fill that place. She felt sore, she has cultivated the soreness, and it's added to by the fact that she is to a great extent dependent on me. I pity poor Ella from the bottom of my heart, but——"

There was a rustle in that portion of the library at Trelyn Towers which was screened off from the rest of the room to make a cosy writing corner for the lady visitors who preferred it to their own rooms, and Ella stepped out into the dumb-

foundered presence of her step-mother and Sir Walter St. Austle.

“Don’t waste any pity on me for being dependent on you, Mrs. Poynter ; I will try to pay all my debts to you in time ”

The girl began her speech with a poor, pathetic attempt at dignity, but before she had spoken a dozen words she lapsed into furious rapidity, an always feeble error. Her clear, olive skin glowed with an angry red ; her humid purple eyes deepened into black behind their long, curly lashes ; and her slender, lithe little form quivered with the emotion she longed to pourtray imposingly.

“Ella !” Mrs. Poynter began, in utter astonishment. Then she added impatiently : “ Don’t talk such folly ! Some people might make the mistake of thinking you meant it.”

For once Ella felt cowed and confused. She could not delude herself into fancying that she had either embarrassed or alarmed her step-mother by the childish petulance with which she had thrown down her little glove. But that she had annoyed Mrs. Poynter was evident. Mrs. Poynter annoyed and not frightened would be no sport at all. After all, those weapons which were concealed in Ella's writing-case would not very seriously wound a foe who offered an armour of either indifference or defiance to their poisoned points. But would she remain either indifferent or defiant if Mr. St. Austle saw them bared to strike her? No! Ella, after a week's keen observation of the pair in the delightful unrestraint of a bachelor's country house, thought decidedly not.

Against her sense of right, against her better judgment, even against her instinct of self-preservation, which was as keen in her as it is in most women, Mrs. Poynter had come to Trelyn Towers and had brought Ella with her. Being with Guy daily, hourly almost, in his own old home was dearly pleasant to her at times, and at others desperately painful. The pleasant times were when he was taking her about in the gardens and shrubberies, the stables and kennels, telling her of the days when he had ridden his first pony by his pretty mother's side ; of when and where he had shot his first rabbit as a tiny boy of seven, and later on, when, as proudly-elated chaps of ten, Walter and he had gone out with the hounds with their father, and not ridden merely to the

meet with their mother, as in previous years. Listening to him, sympathising with him, taking a keen interest in all his half-suppressed, loving reminiscences of his mother and those boyish days, she forgot herself, and lapsed into such happiness as startled her. When she became conscious she was revelling in it. And then she would draw back into her shell of reserve, and cause him to feel that he had made no more way with her than he had that first day at Lynmouth, when Walter came with boisterous, cheerful confidence into their lives.

The painful times were those when Ella's searching eyes were bent on her, with a look that she felt was intended to remind her of something which would be bad to remember. But what that some-

thing was she could not for the life of her imagine. For Ella could not know! Certainly Ella *could* not know anything of the only circumstance [in her life which poor Mabel Poynter desired to be buried in oblivion.

There were other moments of perplexity and embarrassment for her, in addition to those just mentioned. Sir Walter had fallen, in his gay unobservant way, into a habit of treating her in a semi-fraternal manner, that would have been delightfully flattering to her had she dreamt for a moment of relaxing her determination never to marry his brother. But this was a dream she would not allow herself to indulge in. She had no fancy for hearing her hero say, when the first love-glamour was over, and the matrimonial

chain began to gall ever so slightly, that it had been foreign to his tastes and against his instincts that he had eaten of a fruit which had been plucked by another man.

"And even Guy would be sure to have his moments of impatience and ungenerosity when he got accustomed to me as his wife. All men have them! And all women too for that matter. And as his wife I should be bound to listen to the verbal outcome of these moods! It would be too awful to hear him say that he was sorry I had ever belonged to another man! I love him so that I might get to hate him, if he hurt me to that degree. Whereas, now, I shall go on loving him to the end, and he!—yes, I feel sure he will go on wishing for me."

This was the line of argument she would take, against her impulses, in favour of love and Guy, every night when she got herself into her own room alone. She would strengthen them considerably, now and again, when she had been more than ordinarily heavily tempted during the day. For she was still young enough to feel "the maddened pulses glow" when his hand pressed hers, or his eyes seemed to burn as he held her under their spell. In fact she was very much in love with her fine, handsome, clever lover, very much in love with him, very proud of him, very jealous of him, and it may be added very much afraid of ever becoming his wife.

There was a second light romance going on in the house, of which no one seemed to take much heed, though in

reality the Davises were desperately alive to it, and desperately desirous that it should culminate in a speedy common-place marriage, without any preliminary hitches or jars. Mr. Davis had his own sound, business-like, strong reasons for wishing to see his lovely sister well settled in life soon, and Mrs. Davis understood the wish, without knowing anything of the causes which gave force and volume to it. Sir Walter was very much enamoured by this time. The constant sight of such a lovely, good-tempered woman as Laura, had brought him to the pass of feeling that everything would look very leaden-hued for a time, should he lose that sight. Moreover, he admitted to himself that "her dollars" would come in very handy," for things had gone wrong with his most

promising two-year-old thoroughbreds; so wrong that the colt could never be started on any but an insignificant local race-course, where it would have nothing half as breedly as himself to beat. Further, his famous sire, the Knight, for whom he had paid four figures, had died of heart disease. Altogether things were looking very mournful, both in his breeding and training stables; and though he made no moan about it to those around him, he began to acknowledge that a rich wife would be not only a luxury, but a necessity for him. Laura was rapidly becoming a most charming necessity to him, but, great as the pace was, it was not half fast enough for Mr. Robert Davis.

“I want to see Laura settled, well settled, before another month is over our

heads," he would say repeatedly to his wife, who would respond feelingly :

"So do I, I am sure, Robert ; *I* should have been glad to see her settled in a home of her own years ago, but you gave in to all her nonsense, and allowed her to let good chance after good chance slip through her fingers."

"This is the best chance she has ever had, and it mustn't be let slip through her fingers. I think he means straight enough, but he's such a deuce of a time about it. Why don't you drop in on them some morning when they're spooning away in the billiard-room, under the pretence of his teaching her billiards. He'd have to speak out if you saw any billing and cooing going on."

"Robert! you never asked me to do

anything so underhand before in your life," she said, shocked out of her usual acquiescent amiability.

"I never felt so underhand before in my life," he replied irritably; "it's no use bothering you with my business worries, Anna, so don't ask me anything, but just do as I tell you, clinch this matter with Sir Walter as soon as you can."

After all the matter was clinched by Laura herself, in a very justifiably feminine fashion.

The whole party had gone to a ball one night, that was got up by subscription among any number of the adjacent families to inaugurate the reign of good-fellowship between the "County" and professional townspeople, just before an impending general election. It was held in the

rooms of a picturesque hotel, rooms that were normally devoted to the service of bazaar projectors, political orators, amateur theatricals, missionary meetings, and other entertainments of a more or less popular order. But they lent themselves admirably to the requirements of a ball. The white-washed walls gleamed snowily through wreaths of ivy and trophies of flags. The summer houses in the old-world garden that climbed up a steep hill in a series of rough terraces, made deliciously cool and sequestered "sitting-out" rooms, and it was in one of these latter that, when the night was well on, Sir Walter St. Austle "spoke out," as Laura afterwards described his action to her brother.

There had been quite an easy flow of

conversation between them for at least twenty minutes. Silence had always been mildly abhorrent to Laura's essentially sociable nature and chatty disposition. It has been told how, in the days of her engagement to Guy St. Austle, she had always laboured under a faint dread of not being able to catch on to his meaning, and therefore of responding in an irrelevant, not to say an imbecile, manner. But with Sir Walter she laboured under no such demoralising fear. His remarks were never over her head; his loquacity never laid her under the obligation of originating a conversation. In short, she was at her most placid ease with him, and her sense of comfort made her a most soothing companion to the excitable, volatile man at her side.

"There goes your brother. Who is it with him?" Laura asked, pointing out a pair who had just stepped out of one of the open windows of the ball-room and were wending their way towards the river that took its tortuous course through the garden. "Mrs. Poynter, I suppose; he generally gets with her when he can, doesn't he?"

"In this instance it's Miss Poynter; Guy's not going to transfer his allegiance from the step-mother to the step-daughter, I hope, for somehow I don't quite like that little girl."

"She's very nice-looking," Laura said generously; "sometimes her funny little dark face is quite pretty (not nearly as pretty as she has made it in her likeness of herself, though), and her eyes are wonderful. But I never should think her quite

good enough for Mr. St. Austle! I never thought myself quite good enough for him, you know."

She looked him so frankly in the face, she so honestly meant what she said, that Sir Walter was staggered into saying :

"Not good enough for him! You're good enough for the best fellow breathing, a great deal too good for me, or I should have asked you before now to be my wife."

"And I should have said before just what I say now, that I shall like very much indeed to be your wife," Laura said without emotion, but with agreeable earnestness. "You know all about your brother and me, so I have nothing to tell. He's the only person I have ever been engaged to before you! And I never seemed quite properly engaged to him, because I

was in a fright for fear I shouldn't understand him or bore him or something. Now I don't feel that with you *a bit*," she added heartily, and Sir Walter tried to feel flattered by her expression of absolute confidence.

"I can't be thankful enough that you found out your mistake about Guy when you did," Sir Walter answered gallantly. He was trying hard to forget that Laura had only found out her mistake about Guy when it appeared more than probable that Guy's fortunes would always remain at a low ebb. It was more than probable he thought now that the girl had never cared for Guy, and that she had been hurried into the engagement by the wishes of her family. "No such pressure was being put upon her now! She was coming to him

of her own free will," he told himself proudly.

"I shall give your brother a hint of this to-night!" he said in his joyous desire to make every one around him as happy as himself.

"Do!" Laura said cordially; "he has been wishing for it so much."

The phrase sounded harshly in Sir Walter's ears—"Wishing for it so much!" Then the possibility of it occurring had been discussed in the Davis family. However, Laura couldn't help her people conjecturing about and diplomatizing for her. He had felt all along that they were not nearly as refined either in mind, manner, or physique as she was. But what did that matter? He was going to marry her, not them.

"It's a little chilly; shall we go in? That's a lovely waltz they're playing!" she hazarded.

He put his arms round her and drew her towards him.

"Oh, my hair!" she cried gently, as he kissed her. "The worst of the parted fringe is that if half-a-dozen hairs get out of place you look untidy."

"Never mind! you'd look lovely if every hair on *your* head was out of place," he said rapturously.

"Oh, no, I shouldn't. I should look like one of those classical creatures, Gorgons aren't they called?" she said laughing. "Now, shall we go in and tell Robert?"

He would much rather have stayed with her a little longer in the sequestered summer-house, but her will was law in

these early days. So they went in, and Robert was told.

“There’s no man in the world to whom I should give my sister with so much satisfaction,” he said huskily ; and it was with the greatest difficulty he restrained himself from asking, “when the wedding would be?”

Meanwhile Guy had been drawn down to the bank of the river by Miss Poynter. He had been dancing with her, hearing from her in fragmentary sentences that she had for months been in the habit of making countless studies of his head.

“The first one was a slavish copy of the big photograph Mrs. Poynter has of you,” she told him, “but directly I began to draw your face I saw so much more in it than the photograph shows. I think you will see

yourself more in my studies of you, sketchy as they are, than you ever saw in a likeness of yourself before."

He was not in the least flattered. Intuitively he felt that the girl had some object to gain that she might turn him to account in gaining. It was neither love of him nor admiration of him which had led her to see more and try to reproduce more in his face than the photograph had shewn her.

"The portrait painter's is a charmingly interesting talent; you have evidently not laid yours up in a napkin," he said carelessly. He was wanting to be back with Mabel, and wondering what she would think of his midnight promenade with her antagonistic step-daughter. There was not the slightest touch of sentiment, there was

not the faintest attempt on her part to initiate a flirtation. In spite of her words about his face and her power of reading it, he saw that for some reason or other he was more repellent than attractive to her. At the same time he saw that he held a deep interest for her. What did it mean?

Suddenly she said :

“Do you believe in telling character from handwriting?”

“If there’s any character to be told—yes!”

“Will you mind giving me an old scrap of your writing?”

“You shall have a folio of manuscript that has come back with a proof of a story to-day.”

“Has your writing altered much since—say several years ago?”

"Not much—not at all, I believe."

"Don't give me anything that's written on lines," she said eagerly; "I want what will look like a bit of a letter."

"You shall have it without fail to-morrow, and I trust you'll read a very pretty character from it of me."

"Oh, it's no nonsense of that sort that I'm thinking of," she said abstractedly, and when he asked her what other "motive she had for wanting a scrap of his writing," she answered brusquely:

"*That* I am not going to tell you; you may know in time. I can't say, I don't feel sure, but——! Now we'll go back and dance."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. DAVIS SEES VISIONS.

“Now that the offer is made and accepted, I shall tell St. Austle what’s the truth, and that is that I am due in town on important business, and I shall take Laura and you with me. She can’t stay on in the house of the man she’s engaged to ; it’s not the right thing to do. But I hope before we go the wedding day will be fixed for an early date.”

“But, Robert, Laura must have time to get her *trousseau* !” his wife said deprecatingly. Her husband’s recently developed anxiety to get rid of his sister puzzled and slightly alarmed her. But she was not an

imaginative woman. She did not go out of her depth to meet evil half-way.

“Her *trousseau* be —— I mean can’t she and you together get her *trousseau* ready in a month at the latest? What on earth should they linger on for? they’re neither of them chickens! He’ll be glad to settle now he has made up his mind to it you’ll find, and I’ll have no delays on our side.”

“We can’t ask him to hurry on the marriage, Robert. Laura’s feelings must be considered. Laura would be shocked at the appearance of indecent haste.”

Now that Laura was about to make a brilliant marriage, Mrs. Robert Davis felt quite tenderly towards her.

“Laura’s feelings! Laura’s fiddlesticks! There are other things to be considered besides *feelings* now. Her *interests* are at

stake. There's many a slip between the cup and the lip. I don't want any slip to happen here."

"What *do* you want me to do, Robert?"

"You leave St. Austle to me, but impress upon Laura that there must be no shilly-shallying on her part. When he presses for an early marriage, as he will, she's to agree at once without any mock-modest hesitation."

"Very well! I'll tell her. But I can't see any reason for being in such a hurry. The engaged time is the happiest of a girl's life."

Mr. Davis almost stamped with impatience, and permitted himself to speak more roughly than he had ever spoken to his wife before.

"Look here, Anna, if any confounded nonsense of this sort is talked, and the

marriage is deferred, I shall have to thank you for half ruining——”

“Robert!” the poor woman interrupted pleadingly, “don’t speak, don’t look at me like that. I’ll do everything you wish, only I can’t see——”

“You surely can see to do what I tell you, my dear Anna,” he said more temperately, and his dear Anna promised that she would obey his directions to the letter.

* * * * *

Sir Walter not only met, but outstripped, Mr. Davis’s views on the subject of an early marriage. He had not only brought himself up to the point of being very much in love with his beautiful, placid betrothed, but some of her money would be useful to him, and that right soon. His losses on the turf and on his breeding farm had been heavier

lately than anyone surmised, much less knew—with the exception of himself and his bankers. It was not at all immaterial to him that the beautiful woman he was going to marry was—through her brother's wise investments and good management—a wealthy woman.

“Davis is a fellow who would never have anything to do with any concern that's not as sound as a bell,” Sir Walter told Guy, when the latter asked “where Laura's money was?”

“Davis is a very long-headed, far-sighted fellow. I haven't bothered myself about details, but he told me the other day that his ostensible business—the varnish—is merely one of the smaller irons he has in the fire.”

“Sorry to hear it. I'm not fond of

unmentionable big irons myself," Guy said. "However, *his* affairs don't concern us, so long as Laura is all safe."

"O, safe! safe as houses," Walter responded confidently. Then he went on to say that he was glad to find that his brother and his bride-elect were on such good terms!

"Good terms!" Guy echoed. "My dear old boy, who could help being on good terms with such an awfully sweet, nice woman as Laura is, and always has been since the day I knew her first? You didn't think I was going to bear malice because she threw me over long ago, did you?"

"Well, hardly!" Walter said hesitatingly, for he remembered how uncommonly pleased Guy had been to be thrown over.

"It will come off soon, I hope. I want

to see you turned off before I start for Australia."

"Australia? What are you going to Australia for?"

"Like the country, and want to run a play in Melbourne before I try my luck with it here."

"What an unsettled chap you are!"
Walter said feelingly.

"Haven't had much to settle me yet," his brother replied, half-smiling, half-sighing. "'Settling' for me would mean now subsiding in comfortable, apathetic, selfish, semi-idleness in bachelor's quarters in London, where I should run in a groove and soon rust out. I have plenty of work in me still, but to do it properly I must get out of the old country for a time."

"How would Laura like Australia for

the honeymoon trip, I wonder?—A grand idea, Guy. I'll write and propose it to her. When must you go—August?"

"I thought of leaving Plymouth in the *Maori Queen*, on the 20th August——"

"Then I'll ask Laura to make me the happiest man on earth on the 15th, and we'll join you at Plymouth on the 20th. I wish you were taking a wife of your own out, Guy; you'd settle fast enough then!"

Guy puffed away unexcitedly at his cigarette, examined the petals of a York and Lancaster rose carefully, and said—nothing!

"I was rather in hopes that something would come of Mrs. Poynter's visit here," Walter went on nervously. He was quite boyishly anxious to see his brother as happy in holy wedlock as he himself meant to be soon. It had always been so

with Walter. He always had wanted to see Guy in the possession of every pleasant thing which fell to his own share. In his inexperience he believed that his wife was going to prove the pleasantest thing the world had yet bestowed upon him, so, naturally, he wanted Guy to have a wife too.

“Something did come of Mrs. Poynter’s visit here. I got fonder of her than I’d been before, and, God knows, *that* was needless,” Guy said gruffly. He hated having his feelings laid bare and dissected by the hand of fraternal affection. At the same time he loved Walter better than ever for showing such interest in him at this crisis of his (Walter’s) own life.

“And she?”

“She managed always to put me off when I was on the point of telling her so.”

“Yet, if ever a woman was in love with a man in her life, Mrs. Poynter is in love with you,” Walter said, as solemnly as if he were stating a fact with which Guy was presumably totally unacquainted.

“She likes me, I know that,” the latter said thoughtfully; “but something holds her back. She’s always holding herself in check, yet there’s no mortal reason why we two shouldn’t join hands and go along the road together. No other woman has ever interested me and fulfilled all my requirements in a woman as she does; and I believe if she could be made to speak out, that she would say that it’s the same on her side about me. But some cursed shadow has stepped in between us, and—well! perhaps I may find solace in dramatic success in Australia,

to say nothing of the smiles of Australian girls."

"Do you think she loses under old Poynter's will if she marries again?" Walter suggested prosaically.

"I don't know. That's a thing that wouldn't deter her; she knows I've enough for both."

"She's a very independent-spirited woman. She wouldn't like owing everything to her husband, even to you."

"It's not that, I'm sure, but what it is God only knows!—it's a *good* motive, on that I would stake my life. Mabel couldn't be actuated by any but a good motive."

His eyes grew deeply tender as he spoke about her, and the bluer eyes of his more emotional brother filled with sympathetic tears.

“Dear old Guy!” he said fervently. “It’s beastly hard that *I* should have it all my own way, as I’ve had it all along, while you, my other half, come in for such a lot of roughnesses. I get the woman I want above every other woman, and, as it happens, she’ll bring me the money I happen to want at the present moment also; while you can’t get the woman you want, and who wants you, without regard to money at all, but simply because there’s some beastly back-stairs, evil influence at work between you. Do you think it’s that step-daughter?” Then he told Guy how Ella had slipped out from the cosy writing corner upon Mrs. Poynter and himself one day, and repeated as well as he could remember the words she had used.

“Poor little Ella! it’s rather rough on

her to be suspected of scheming," Guy said compassionately. Without being a vain man there was human nature enough about him to make him feel very tolerantly towards a girl who had taken so much trouble in doing justice to his characteristic face. He had unquestionably interested Miss Poynter he felt, though he did not think for a moment that there was any tender feeling in the interest. Her scarcely veiled antagonism to her step-mother struck him as being "childish," and absolutely of no consequence at all. He attributed it to her filial loyalty to her dead mother, and rather respected her for the sentiment, though he was sorry to see it levelled against the woman he loved.

Just before leaving Trelyn—the party had broken up and dispersed as soon as

Laura's engagement to the host was announced—Ella had taken Guy aside and told him that she had “found out what she wanted to know from his handwriting, and that what she had found out had made her like him better than she had done before.” “Perhaps some day I may tell you why I wanted it,” she had added. “I certainly shall do so if I can save you from making a very, very, *very* terrible mistake.”

At the time he had laughed at the comic solemnity of her words and manner. There was something ludicrous in the idea of this girl, who appeared to be rather slow-witted and ill-informed on every other subject than painting, taking him under her small wing, and according him the promise of her protection should need for it arise. She had seen his smile of amusement and

been nettled by it. But she had shown no resentment at the time. He was sure to put himself in the position she had predicted. And then! Well! then it would be time enough to let him know why she had tried to familiarize herself with his character through the mediumship of his features and handwriting.

Perhaps not even the bridegroom-elect was more impatient for the wedding-day to arrive than was his brother, for Mrs. Poynter was to be one of the guests, and Guy had no fair excuse for presenting himself before her [until that time. Indeed, she had told him that she and her step-daughter would not go back to town till the eve of the wedding, and though she had told him she should "be moving about" till that time, she had not given him

her flying addresses. So he remained at Trelyn Towers with Walter, and improved the time by polishing up the play which he intended taking to Australia with him.

It was well for Sir Walter at this juncture that he had such a felicitous matrimonial prospect before him, for another piece of ill-luck befell him in his training stables. This time it was "The Promise of May," the filly who was intended to be the "crop of the bunch of three-year-olds" the following year who went wrong. No blame attached to anyone, either to her trainer or to the boy who rode her and loved her better than his life, but a back sinew was strained, and all hope of the faultless filly being an Ascot winner next year was over.

Meanwhile at Norwood preparations for

Laura's marriage were being made with the lavish liberality which had been Robert Davis's great characteristic since he had begun to amass wealth by other means than that of his ostensible business, the manufacture, namely, of varnish. Every friend, and nearly every acquaintance on either side was bidden to the banquet and ball which were to be given in honour of the alliance. The contingent of aristocratic people, Sir Walter's following, was small in comparison with the masses who belonged to the Davis faction. But they (the aristocrats) were likely to make up for the smallness of their numbers by the magnitude of their condescension in coming so far from the borders of their own world as the merchant prince's house at Norwood. And the City faction were nearly all rich to

a degree that was revolting to the other side, and fully equal to the latter in arrogance.

But the probably conflicting claims of the rival factions at the forthcoming auspicious function was a matter of supreme indifference to the Davises. Laura herself was blissfully regardless of everything but the supreme fact that she was going to marry an extremely nice man, who would never expect her to understand anything she didn't care about; be the mistress of an extremely nice house to which she could invite everyone who had ever been kind to her for the purpose of being kind to them in return, and do exactly as she liked without having to "consult Anna." Not that she had ever fancied that she writhed and suffered torture under the harrow of Mrs. Davis's rule, but she had always been

good-temperedly conscious that the rule was there, and that she would be restricted by it did she ever attempt to venture beyond its modest bounds.

Mrs. Davis was busily engaged with big, munificent household cares which she delighted in encountering, as she was so well supplied with the munitions of war to meet them. And as for Mr. Davis, he had far more important matters to think of than possible collisions between the "swells" whom he pretended to despise, and those mighty moneyed magnates for whom he had a sincere veneration.

As the day of his sister's marriage approached his spirits became so buoyant, not to say boyishly volatile, that those who knew him best—his wife and Laura—were convinced that some more than ordinarily

brilliant stroke of fortune had befallen him. He was so exuberant in manner that visions of his being knighted—or perhaps even being made a peer—for some big financial service rendered to the Government or the country at large, floated cloudily through Mrs. Davis's rather vague but trusting mind. She had gathered from some source or other—not directly from her husband—that he was connected with a private bank, and she knew that bankers were sometimes ennobled for no other particular reason than because they were exorbitantly rich. She allowed herself to dream of having a voice in the selection of the title, and thought that the name of their Norwood house, "Rezare," would do very well. "Lady Rezare!" She almost heard her name called out at the first

Drawing-room which she would of course attend next season, and condescendingly resolved that Laura, who would be Lady St. Austle by that time, should have the honour of presenting her. But like a wise woman she kept these visions to herself, not even hinting them to Laura, and concealing from Robert that she was noticing his exhilaration of spirit and manner.

“Dear Robert! he wants to give me a pleasant surprise by-and-bye” she thought affectionately, and so she would not thwart him in his intention, or blunt the point of it by appearing to anticipate the glories of which she dreamt.

Poor Mrs. Davis!

CHAPTER X.

“ON BORDER-LAND 'TWIXT HATE AND LOVE.”

ELLA POYNTER sat in her own room in her step-mother's house in Kensington. It was the prettiest bed-room in the house—commanded the best view of the not very far distant gardens, had the sunniest aspect, and was rendered more interesting than any of the other rooms by reason of having two or three odd recesses in it. It always seemed to the girl herself that Mrs. Poynter was trying to make up to her for something! That “something” Miss Ella shrewdly suspected would not redound to Mrs. Poynter's credit if it were ever made public. Ella believed herself to be on the

track of it, and she had no scruples in following it up by fair or foul means. She felt pitilessly towards her father's widow! Years of unbroken kindnesses which she had received from Mabel only made the girl still more dislike the woman who had stepped into her own dear dead mother's place, and so acquired the right and the power to show those kindnesses. Her heart swelled with jealous rage as she thought of "how happy she would have made dear Papa, how probably his happiness would have kept him alive till now" if this soft-eyed, fascinating, sympathetic woman had not "wheedled" him into marrying him. Ella always took it for granted that Mabel had exerted all her arts to lure the late Mr. Poynter into matrimony, and she thought and spoke of

her step-mother to her most familiar friends as having run after "poor dear Papa in the most barefaced manner."

They had come back to town two or three days ago, and now Ella sat in her room comparing the scrap of manuscript which Guy had given her with a well-worn letter which was lying on the table before her. Close by a very exquisitely and faithfully painted miniature portrait of Guy stood propped up on a small table-easel. It annoyed Mrs. Poynter, Ella knew, that she should possess so perfect a likeness of Guy painted by herself. Therefore she had it very much *en evidence* in her room, and arranged fresh flowers before it daily, after the manner of a shrine.

Moreover, another feeling than hatred of Mrs. Poynter had crept into the girl's

heart concerning this likeness and its original. From the moment she discovered that his handwriting did not tally with the writing of the letter before her, she had allowed her artistic and womanly appreciation of his manly good looks to take possession of her. She nourished and cherished her fancy for him, idealising him, and endowing him with many qualities which she thought a man ought to possess. But she did not give him credit for the staunchness, the sincerity and real, manly, pure honourableness which were amongst his strongest characteristics.

That he had been and still was in love with the step-mother of whom she (Ella) so cordially disapproved she felt vexedly sure. But this love should receive such a shock soon, she resolved, as would kill it for ever.

She gloated over the well-worn, much-read letter that was lying open before her! She filled her mind and charged her memory with some of its passionate phrases! She longed to know what manner of man he was, *he* who addressed those hot, compromising words, in confidence that they would be well received, to her *father's wife!*

There was not the slightest doubt about it in Ella's mind. She had found the letter ticketed "from my false wife's lover" in a drawer of her father's writing-table just after his death, before anyone else had meddled with his papers. It never occurred to her to think that there could be any mistake about it anywhere, any weak place in the strong chain of evidence which she believed she had gathered into her own hands against her step-mother. The terms

in which that letter was couched were plainly and unmistakably disgraceful and dishonourable. Ella's cheeks had reddened with burning shame when she read them first, but she was hardened now by her hatred of Mabel, and if the latter would have been pulled down and crushed to the earth by the publicity of them Ella would have read them aloud without hesitation in the market-place to-morrow.

It was as thoroughly compromising a letter as a passionate, careless man has ever penned to the weak, wicked woman who has trusted and confided in him. It began by addressing her as his "own darling, between whom and himself nothing could come." It reminded her of a dozen indiscretions of which they had been guilty during "old Poynter's frequent absences."

It passionately averred that in all but name he regarded her as his wife, and implored her, his "own darling M.," to come to him entirely and cast aside those few remaining fettering scruples which bound her to a husband and a home she hated. It promised her ease, love, luxury, if she would be brave and dare the world instead of living the "crippled life of lying to keep up appearances," which she was struggling to do. It jeered and laughed at, ridiculed and insulted the husband from whom he had lured her. And it wound up with the assertion that he was "hers till death!" but there was no signature.

No wonder that the blood of the girl whose father had been so tricked and degraded, boiled as she read the scorching phrases of illicit love. No wonder that

she longed to wreak some subtle revenge upon the fair-seeming woman to whom this letter was written, and in whose guilt she confidently believed. The only wonder was that she had held her avenging young hand so long. But she had done so with the hope of striking the more surely, and now she was to be rewarded for her hardly sustained patience she told herself, for she would be able to strike the sinner a deadly blow through her love for the honest, honourable gentleman who believed her (Mabel Poynter) to be a pure, virtuous woman.

“When I’m sure of her, when he has asked her to be his wife, and she has got over her pretended reluctance and accepted him, then I’ll hand him this letter and poor Papa’s note upon it, and see him read it

before her face." This had been Ella's first intention. But before long—as soon indeed as she began to entertain warm feelings towards Mr. St. Austle herself—she determined to intervene with that damning letter before Mabel could taste the delights of being engaged to Guy St. Austle even for a day.

She was making ready to throw down the glove as she sat in her pretty room surrounded by a dozen evidences of her step-mother's thoughtful consideration for her. They had only just come home, and half the day had been spent in inspecting and trying on the dresses and hats which they were going to wear at Laura Davis's wedding, two days hence. And now Ella was resting a bit before she went down to afternoon tea.

“There are sure to be half-a-dozen people buzzing round her, and if *he's* one of the number I'll introduce a subject that young ladies don't generally discuss for the sake of seeing that woman shiver,” Ella thought as she slipped into a tea-jacket of a hue and texture that suited her clear brown complexion and supple girlish little figure well.

“Oh, it's hateful! *hateful!* to see a man you like and could love *worthily* if he'd ask you, taken up with such a piece of vicious falsity as Mrs. Poynter,” Ella said aloud in her jealous, angry vindictiveness. “But when once he has read that letter written to her by a scoundrel whom she loved while poor dear papa was alive! he'll hate her and leave her! leave her and I shall laugh at her, and she won't dare to

turn round upon me. And he shall show that he scorns her, or I'll—I'll——"

In her impotent wrath she did not know what to threaten or what she was saying. It was like a douche of cold water in her heated face when, after knocking, her step-mother's maid opened the door and said :

"My mistress's love, and will you come down, Miss Poynter? Mr. St. Austle and other visitors are in the drawing-room."

"I will go down directly," Ella gasped, as composedly as she could ; but, in spite of her utmost endeavour to seem cool and unconcerned, her agitation was very palpable.

"I think Miss Ella must have been playing all by herself," the maid told her fellows at the kitchen tea that evening ; "she was ranting away at a fine rate when I knocked at her door, and when I opened it

there she was leaning on her elbows before her glass, staring at her own face as if she had never seen it before. I can't see anything to make a fuss about in Miss Ella's looks. She has pretty eyes, that I will say for her ; but her skin's as brown as a berry. She's not to be looked at in the same day as Mrs. Poynter."

"She's a deal younger," the page remarked approvingly. He was in the intermediate state, too old for a page boy proper, and too young to be called a footman. Still he was of an age to make observations about the other sex.

Miss Poynter was her quiet little rather repressed self by the time she reached the drawing-room. Her eyes dilated and deepened at sight of Guy St. Austle, with whom she was doing her best to fall

desperately in love, with a view to winning him away effectually from the pernicious wiles of her abhorred step-mother. It was clearly her duty to do all that was in her power to save an honourable gentleman, "such a good-looking one too," from the evil fate of becoming the trusting husband of her (Ella's) father's false wife. It counted for nothing with Ella that the evil-doer was perfectly quiescent in the matter of Guy St. Austle, that in fact she made no effort whatever to beguile him or lead him on. He was beguiled by her, and he was following her up, and Ella thought it a heinous and mean sin on her step-mother's part that those things should be.

The other visitors drifted away one by one until Guy only was left. While the others remained Mrs. Poynter had devoted herself

more exclusively to them, leaving Guy to be entertained by Ella, and while this state of things lasted Ella let her purpose of covering her step-mother with ignominy be in abeyance. But as soon as Mrs. Poynter was free to join in their conversation unfettered by the rival claims of other guests, Ella began to work her own spirit up to a properly vindictive pitch for the purpose of overwhelming the wrong-doer with well-deserved humiliation. She was panting for an opportunity of introducing the subject which should surely sting Mrs. Poynter, and presently that unconscious woman made what Ella thought a good one.

“Have you seen Miss Davis since you have been in town?” Mrs. Poynter asked. “I heard from her the other day, she seems

to be very happy. What a sweet, trustful, unexact nature she has ! ”

“ I went to call on them yesterday, with Walter, and left that blessed individual there to dine. They both seemed very jolly I thought ; she will suit Walter splendidly, counteract his restlessness and never irritate his nerves by being irritable herself ! ” Guy said heartily, and Ella put in sententiously :

“ I hope she will never deceive your brother, Mr. St. Austle. Those quiet women have a way of deceiving their husbands sometimes, I’ve heard.”

“ I don’t think there’s any fear of that,” Guy laughed ; while Mabel with a heightened colour and rather a perturbed manner, said :

“ I don’t think you or any of us are called upon to discuss such possibilities.”

“I suppose you think that I, an unmarried girl, ought to pretend to be ignorant of such improper ‘possibilities,’” Ella said eagerly, with as near an approach to a sneer as she dared venture to execute, under the clear disapproving gaze of her step-mother; “but unfortunately,” the girl went on hurriedly, “they are possibilities that one can’t help thinking about, as we see so many of them realized. Look here!” she added, picking up a weekly journal, “see this long paragraph about Lord Deriot having commenced divorce proceedings against his wife. I wonder how he found her out? I wonder if he found a letter from her lover!—that’s the way half——”

“Ella!” Mrs. Poynter interrupted. There was a ring of sharp pain in her voice as

she uttered the single word, that made Ella's heart leap with malicious joy, and gave Guy an uneasy feeling, he could not fancy why.

"Why do you say 'Ella,' like that, and try to stop me, Mrs. Poynter? Mr. St. Austle wouldn't believe me if I pretended to be ignorant of such horrible things as married women's faithlessness and sin. I was only going to say that it's through indiscreet letters—so I have heard—that half the women are found out. Why you're looking as much shocked as if you had never even heard the subject mentioned before! Lord Deriot isn't like some husbands I've heard of, he isn't going to forgive his wicked wife and die quietly of a broken heart."

Her eyes flashed fire, her bosom heaved,

her words fell like shot on her hearers' ears. Mrs. Poynter looked at her in surprise, dashed with anger and pity. How much did the girl know? did she know anything, or had she hit upon this terrible topic in mere malevolent inadvertence? Mabel forced her mind away from the subject and tried to re-introduce that social calm in the atmosphere which Ella had disturbed.

“You still mean to go to Australia?” she asked of Guy, and he answered :

“Unless something very unforeseen occurs within the next ten days.” Then he went on to tell her that there was a strong vein of Colonial interest in his new play, and so successfully took the conversation away from those dangerous divorce depths into which Ella had plunged it. But though he did

this, though he went on ably seconding all Mabel's efforts to keep the conversation on a light social level, Ella saw that he looked pained and thoughtful, and hugged herself with delight at the idea of having implanted the first seed of doubt in his mind.

"It's my duty to Papa, to poor dear Papa, who *died* of that woman's wickedness, to expose her, and save poor Guy St. Austle from her toils. Why should she have everything? Papa's money, and I dependent on her! and Guy's love! She ought to be punished in this world; poor Papa spared her, but I don't see that I am called on to do it. She ought to go through some of the open shame and misery that other women who have done wrong have to suffer *here*. How do I know that

she'll be punished hereafter ? she may repent and be forgiven. Besides, if she is punished I shan't know it. I want to see her humbled here, and I want her to lose Guy's love. When she's *quite* humbled and he hates her, I think I can be kind to her, perhaps ; I even might go so far as to ask him to speak to her. But she must suffer first !—oh ! yes, she must suffer first."

It had become a fixed idea—more than that, a religion—with Ella Poynter that she was the chosen instrument through whom Mrs. Poynter's nose was to be brought to the grindstone. There were moments when she could not help remembering how uniformly kind and considerate the ill-starred woman had been to her (Ella) since the day of her father's marriage until now. But these were moments of weakness, Ella

thought, and so she lived through them and blotted them out as quickly as possible. They were most successfully blotted out now, when she was forced to admit that her step-mother was looking remarkably attractive, and that Guy St. Austle was visibly very much alive to the fact.

"How can he bear to hanker after other men's leavings?" the girl thought angrily, "Oh, he *shall* know—he shall know that she is not only poor Papa's widow, but that she was a *forgiven wife*!—a woman some other man left, and Papa had pity upon! He shall know it! he ought to know it for his own sake—and mine."

"We shall not meet again till the wedding-day," Mabel was saying, very decidedly, while these thoughts were filtering through her step-daughter's little

brain. "I hope the sun will shine very brightly upon them, I hope every omen will be auspicious that day."

Ella's body and soul knit themselves together resolutely and strengthened her to make yet another effort to corner and confuse the wrong-doer. Her lithe little figure shivered through every muscle and nerve as she fixed her big purple eyes on her step-mother as she asked :

"Did the sun shine brightly on *you* the day you married Papa?—were all the omens auspicious *then*?—if they were I don't believe in omens."

"There was no sunshine about on the day I married your father, it was mid-winter, and a hard black frost reigned," Mrs. Poynter said coldly. "Must you go now, Mr. St. Austle? I won't say good-

bye, for we shall meet again before you go to Australia."

"And so shall we," Ella said eagerly. "I want to give you a plot for a play, Mr. St. Austle—a plot from real life!—I'll tell it to you when I see you again."

"Young ladies should know nothing of plots or plotting," he answered carelessly, and Ella felt insulted by his indifference.



CHAPTER XI.

“SO HIGHLY RESPECTED !”

“MR. DAVIS seems to feel parting with his sister terribly,” several of the guests remarked to one another, when—the ceremony over—they were strolling about the reception-rooms at Rezare, looking at the costly wedding gifts which were strewn about. Laura’s circle of friends and acquaintances had been liberal in their marks of approbation of her choice of a husband, and of her lot in life being so admirably well cast. The City people had come down with such an amount of jewellery and silver as would have enabled Laura to start a jeweller’s and silversmith’s shop

with a good stock-in-trade, and Sir Walter's set had contributed a fair number of exceedingly pretty, if less expensive, articles. Altogether, the show of wedding presents was a very brilliant one, and Lady St. Austle was radiant with pleasure at the sight of it. In fact, the only person who was not radiant with pleasure on the occasion was the master of the gorgeous house, the brother of the radiant bride, Robert Davis, the millionaire and City man, himself.

There was a magnificent banquet, to which over two hundred guests sat down; and, in spite of Sir Walter's prayers and entreaties, the speech-makers seemed about to have it all their own appalling way, when an awkward and startling interruption occurred.

The oldest friend of the family, the donor of the most magnificent of the three diamond necklaces which had been bestowed upon lucky Laura, had faltered and staggered through numerous elongated and involved sentences, and had wound up with a burst of well-meant but incomprehensible emotion in praise and laudation of the bride, and Sir Walter had replied tersely and happily. Then someone else had proposed the health of their honoured and estimable friend Mr. Davis, the brother of the bride, and Mr. Davis was just getting on his legs to reply, when the untoward incident occurred.

It came in the form of that modern messenger of Fate, a telegram; and as Mr. Davis read it, his jaw dropped, a sickly pallor overspread his face, and he

sank down into his chair like one who has had a bad blow or an attack of faintness.

Two hundred pairs of eyes were on him, for the attention of the whole party had been enforcedly bestowed upon him when he rose to return thanks, and at least a hundred pairs of lips questioned eagerly, "What is the matter?" He fought valiantly for a moment with his weakness, rose up again, thanked them briefly, and under cover of the cheers and confusion that followed, slipped out of the room, unnoticed by every one apparently but his wife.

In a minute she had followed him up into his dressing-room. He was standing before an open *escritoire*, hurriedly filling a pocket-book with bank-notes and papers, his hands trembling like aspen-leaves, an

unaccountable look of crouch in his bearing and of dread in his eyes.

“Robert!”

Her hand was on his arm as she spoke his name, with a ring of such tenderness in her voice as he had never heard before. The impatient scowl which had overspread his face when he thought that she had followed him, “out of curiosity to pry into his affairs,” vanished as he realised the depth of loving sympathy which her tender tones revealed.

“God forgive me for having distrusted her; but my trust in everyone, in everything, is shaken,” he thought, as he stooped to kiss her, at the same time putting her gently out of the way.

“Go back to our guests, Anna dear. They will think there is something amiss if we are both absent. Go back at once!”

"There is something amiss," she said sorrowfully.

"No, no!—a mere business matter gone a trifle wrong. I must go and settle it. Go back to our guests; be brave, keep up a good heart; don't—don't let them suspect anything yet."

"Robert!" There was a sharp ring of anguish in her tone now. "There is something wrong, terribly wrong; I see it in your face. Something dreadful is going to happen. Keep me with you!" she cried suddenly; "let me help you."

"You will help me best by going back to our guests. I must go, now at once; time is of vital importance. I can't stay to explain—I will write to you to-night. Go back, and don't say that I have left home. Let them think I shall rejoin them pre-

sently. Go back! for Heaven's sake, go back!"

He had been hurrying a few articles of clothing into a Gladstone as he spoke, and now he stood, bag in hand, looking strangely hunted and wild, she thought. She read ruin in his face and manner, but never for a moment did she think of how she herself would be affected by it. Her first thought was for him, her second for the little boys, for whom she had already begun to plan brilliant futures.

"Kiss the children before you go, Robert?" she pleaded. "Yes, yes! I will go back to the company at once."

"Go! kiss the boys for me. I will write to-night," he jerked out. Then he stepped to the window which opened on to one of the terraces that ran up to the

second storey at the back of the house. "Good-bye! I'll write to-night," he said, smiling in a ghastly way that thrilled her with far more pain than if he had scowled. "Keep up, Anna; don't let them think anything yet!"

He was gone! He had sneaked out of his own house in a way that shocked her, but not a single doubt or suspicion of him crossed her mind. Something terrible had happened, that was clear enough; and she must do her best to help him in the way he had commanded. Her brain was throbbing, her hands were cold and clammy with the anguish of her nervousness. But after a moment or two she steadied her limbs, and went back to the banquet from which she had scarcely been missed.

To one or two of those who sat near to

her she remarked, that " a business man's time was never his own," dressing her poor anxious face with a false smile as she spoke. It seemed to her that every one at those magnificently decorated tables must be conscious of and wondering about the absence of the giver of the feast. But as a matter of fact, no one but herself missed him, much less marvelled at his disappearance.

It was a gorgeous feast, and no one was anxious to curtail it. The different cliques separated and respectively enjoyed themselves, each disparaging the other set with much complacency. The few with whom this story has to do were too happy in their own immediate present to take any note of the hostess' air of suppressed distress. Sir Walter and his bride, as

became them, were light-heartedly indifferent to everyone but themselves, and Guy St. Austle sat next to the woman whom he knew loved him as dearly as he loved her, though she persisted in so unaccountably holding aloof from him. On his other side was Ella, well satisfied for the time being to get his divided attention, since she felt sure that in good time she would be able to open his eyes to the worthlessness of the woman who at present held his infatuated heart in her unworthy thrall. No! not his heart! Ella didn't like to think that it was his heart which her step-mother controlled. It was his vanity that Mrs. Poynter flattered and by that means obtained and maintained a pernicious ascendancy over him. All—even the best men are vain, the girl argued, and those

horrid, middle-aged women, especially the ones with wicked experience, knew exactly how to pander to this special masculine vein. "Now I will never flatter him! Guy shall never get anything but the simple truth from me, however painful it may be for him to hear it," the stern young moralist thought. And all the while she was flattering him by every art of which she was the innocent mistress. Listening to the few words he let drop for her individual benefit as if they were valuable as refined gold or diamonds of the purest lustre, and (subtlest flattery of all) showing the keenest annoyance whenever he gave absorbed attention to Mrs. Poynter, her words and wants.

There was no flagging in the hilarity. All was going as merrily as the proverbial

marriage-bell when Lady St. Austle rose to go and change into her travelling dress. Then for the first time she observed the absence of her brother.

"Where is Robert?" she said, addressing no one in particular, and her question remained unanswered, for at the same moment the butler approached his mistress and whispered something to her rapidly.

In a few minutes confusion reigned throughout the assemblage of unthinking guests. Rumours were heard of a bank having stopped payment under odd circumstances. The presence of the arm of the law was felt in the atmosphere. Mr. Davis was wanted and was not forthcoming. Mrs. Davis when questioned was dumb with shame and fear for the husband by whom she was determined to stick whatever might be-

fall him. Strange men came in and assumed airs of being within their rights when they took possession of everything they found on the premises, including Laura's wedding presents. "It's the biggest private bank failure that's been known for half a century," one of the unwelcome incomers told half-a-dozen of the upper servants in confidence, "and your governor's one of the slipperiest rascals out. Lucky for him if he isn't a lifer if he's caught, and he can't have got far ; they're sure to catch him."

The two women, the wife and sister, rushed away into such privacy as they could find, and cried together over the appalling, inexplicable blow which had fallen upon them. "Send everone away," Mrs. Davis had implored of Sir Walter

when the first murmurs arose; "make them all go. There's something dreadful happened, and poor Robert has gone up to the City to meet it instead of waiting here. You know what Robert is? You know that he wouldn't waste a moment when business calls him. Make all the people go, Walter; the sound of them in his house when he's away from it in trouble drives me mad."

"They shall all go and—I'll not take Laura away from you to-day," Sir Walter replied with an impetuous gulp. He realised quite as fully as the unhappy wife did that ruin had fallen upon Robert Davis, and he grasped another fact which she battled against entertaining yet. Ruin was not the worst thing from which Robert Davis had fled. Fraud and disgrace were in the atmosphere that surrounded his

abrupt and surreptitious departure.

“Thank God I can take Laura clear away from it all,” he thought, manfully, as he faced enquiries and put the best colouring he could upon the ugly subject ; “her sweet heart would have broken for this trouble if she had not had me to turn to.”

When he said that he would not take Laura away from her, all that was unselfish in Mrs. Davis’s nature rose up.

“Give me the only happiness I can have till Robert comes back,” she said ; “let me feel that Laura is safe and happy and away from all this trouble, Walter. He always thought so much of his sister, you know ? It would half kill him if he thought that a business trouble of his spoilt her wedding-day. And the trouble will be over soon, whatever it is. Robert has such a splendid

head, and he's thought so highly of in the City."

She spoke with a good show of confidence in her own assertion, that all would be well soon, and that Robert would come back, but all the time, poor woman, her heart belied her words. Sir Walter saw through the brave effort of wifely loyalty, and knew that the kindest thing he could do for the poor harassed woman would be to rid her of the presence of everyone before whom she felt it incumbent on her to hold up. So he dismissed the guests with as little lame an explanation as he was capable of uttering, and prepared to take his wife away.

"Don't mind, dear," Laura said affectionately to her sister-in-law as she was taking leave; "if Robert has lost a lot

of money, he is welcome to the fortune he has made for me. Walter would have every penny settled on me you know, so I can do what I like with it, and we shall both like to give it to dear old Robert!"

"Oh, Laura! thank God, thank God, your money is safe," Mrs. Davis sobbed; "his children and I have the right to suffer with him, but he has been a good guardian to you, Laura dear?—a good guardian, and a good brother! I can always feel proud of him for the way he has taken care of you."

"And everything will come right soon," Laura said soothingly, between tears and smiles, "and until it does, Robert must use my money as if it were his own. Walter is rich, we shan't want it? The

carriage at the door, is it? Oh, I *must* go, but it's dreadful to leave you like this."

She ran down hastily, trying to smile hopefully at the frightened servants as she passed groups of them who were standing about to watch her departure. Her brother's carriage was to take her to the station, but she had scarcely seated herself, and been followed into it by her husband, when a tumult arose.

Some of the men in possession objected to such valuable horses being taken off the premises under the existing circumstances. In other words, the horses and carriage were seized, and it was in a common hired fly that Sir Walter and Lady St. Austle drove away from Rezare.

"You will let Robert use my money, till he gets his own back again, won't you?"

Laura asked cheerfully, when they were steaming away from Southampton to the Isle of Wight, where the first few days of their honeymoon were to be spent. And Sir Walter could not help looking rather rueful as he answered :

“Don’t be very much cut up, my darling, if we find that your brother has used it already. Things must have come to a terrible pass before this could have happened.”

Laura looked thoughtful, but not very much distressed.

“Do you think he will be poor now ?” she asked ; “will they have to give up Rezare ? Poor Anna !—she was thinking what a pretty title it would be if they made Robert a peer.”

“I don’t think ‘they’ are likely to do

that," Walter said gravely, "but we'll hope for the best, and if they have to give up Rezare, we'll find a prettier place for them down in Cornwall, near Trelyn. By the way, Laura, I think we will settle down at Trelyn as soon as we can, and give up the Australian scheme. What do you say?"

"I say that whatever you want to do is best; I don't like the sea very much, and I do like Trelyn. Poor Robert! he won't like settling down in the country at all, so I hope it won't come to as bad as that for him. He's a City man, born and bred, you know, Walter; it will be hard to turn him into a country gentleman."

"Very hard, but we must do our best," said Sir Walter.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. GREG.

WHEN Robert Davis escaped from his own house and grounds unmolested, he counted himself a fortunate man, in spite of the mass of misery which had crashed down upon him. The dread of being arrested, like a common felon, had been upon him from the moment that telegram had been put into his hands. Defaulter, forger, swindler, as he knew himself to be, he still retained a considerable portion of that proper pride which becomes a prominent City man. If he could once get out of the country, without first standing in the dock, life might still hold something worth living

for. He tried to bestow a little approval upon himself for having got Laura so well settled before the crash came. This marriage, which he had managed for her, would in a measure compensate her for the loss of every penny she possessed in the world. At any rate, the St. Austle pride would intervene between Laura, who was one of them now, and want of any kind. About his sister, he told himself, his mind might be perfectly at rest.

Then he thought of his wife and boys!

Perhaps for them it would be better if he put a bullet through his head without any further delay. As the widow and children of a suicide they would receive more consideration from a compassionate world than they were likely to get as the wife and children of a living

swindler! But, personally, the idea of blowing out his brains was repugnant to him. If he could only get clear away out of the country, his Gladstone was sufficiently well stuffed with bank notes to enable him to make a new start under a new name. Then Anna and his children could rejoin him, and this distressing incident should be blotted out of their lives.

He had roamed on in an indefinite way while thinking these thoughts. Instinct had taught him to avoid the railway station, where he felt tolerably sure a detective and a fond embrace from handcuffs were awaiting him. He could not walk about all day with that "infernal compromising bag" in his hand. No one would think of searching for him in the immediate vicinity

of his own home. It was here, of course, that seclusion and safety could be found until the vigilance of the bloodhounds of the law relaxed a bit. He turned down a lane as his ruminations reached this point, and found himself walking abreast of a line of detached cottages of gentility on the one side, and a prettily planted row of evergreen shrubs and fir trees on the other. In two or three of these cottage windows cards, bearing the words, "Lodgings to let," were hanging up. He knocked at the door of one of these, and it was opened to him at once by a handsome woman, who struck him at once as being out of keeping with her surroundings.

"I see you have lodgings to let?" he began politely; "I should like to take them for a week or two, but I am a

stranger, an American ; I can't offer you any references."

She had led the way into a pretty little sitting-room as he was speaking, and after asking him to be seated she went on carelessly :

"I am a stranger here also. I can give you no references, therefore all I ask of you is the rent, two guineas a week, in advance for a fortnight. An American are you? How singularly well and] without accent you speak our mother tongue !"

"It's a mistake to think that the nasal drawl is indispensable," he laughed. He was beginning to feel quite hilarious, and as if he were playing in a light comedy. Already his past life seemed to have retreated very far into the background. He quite felt like the stranger in the land which

he proclaimed himself to be. He wanted rest and time to think so much! "Anna and the children would be right enough! someone would look after them until he could pull himself together, and assume his proper place again. Meantime this was a snug little hiding-place, and the woman who kept it was a lady, and wouldn't worry him."

He unpacked and locked away his belongings in the drawers that were placed at his disposal in the bed-room, and by the time he went back into the adjoining sitting-room it was six o'clock. The longing to see an evening paper to read the paragraph about his own awful smash was upon him, but he did not dare to go out and get one from the station. He rang the bell, and it was answered by his landlady herself.

“Is there such a thing as an evening paper to be got near here?” he asked; “have you a servant whom you can send for one?”

“Will you have *The Globe*? it has just been brought to me, you are welcome to it,” she told him. She brought it in presently, and he saw that her eyes were fixed upon a column, headed by the words, in big letters :

“Fraudulent Failure of a Bank. Hundreds Ruined. Startling Revelations.”

His hand shook as he took the paper from her.

“Thank you, Mrs.—Mrs.—I beg your pardon! I have not asked your name yet?”

“I am called Mrs. Greg,” she said carelessly, “and your name is——?”

“Denham—Robert Denham,” he said, remembering, “providentially,” as he said to himself, that his linen and hat-lining were marked R. D.

She looked at him with half-humorous scorn in her dark purple eyes. “When had he seen eyes like them lately? He was sure he had seen those eyes before, but where? His memory was surely not going to fail him? He began to feel profound pity for himself, to feel that he had been hardly dealt with in having received such a bad blow, on what would otherwise have been such an auspicious day in the annals of the Davis family.

“What time would you like to dine, Mr. Denham?” she asked, laying what he thought a most uncalled-for emphasis on his name.

“Eight, of course,” he replied sharply, forgetting for the moment that he was not speaking to his hired cook. “I beg your pardon,” he added hurriedly, “I should have said I would dine at eight o’clock if quite convenient to you.”

“It will be as convenient as any other hour, Mr. Denham. I am new at the trade of ‘landlady’—almost as inexperienced I fancy as you are at the profession of lodger——”

“What do you mean?” he interrupted nervously. Was he to be harassed still further by this odd-looking woman’s innuendoes and suspicions?

“I only meant—what I said,” she laughed; “will you tell me what I am to get for your dinner?”

He was abstracted again, and in his

abstraction he muttered : “ O, just a simple dinner, clear soup, a little fish, and a couple of *entrées*—you know I don’t care for a joint—I mean a—well—I had better leave the catering entirely to you, Mrs. Greg.”

She busied herself about the room for a few minutes, making all things that she touched look more graceful from the contact of her fingers. It fidgeted him into a state of fury nearly to see her moving about in that soft, noiseless way, when he wanted to be alone in order to think ! He was feeling unaccountably tired, faint, and weary ! What an awful thing it would be if he were to have an illness there, become irresponsible, delirious perhaps ! A doctor, a local doctor, who might recognise him, would be sent for, and then—— !

The bare supposition of such a possibility made him shiver.

“I am not feeling well,” he murmured ;
“I know how to treat myself ; don’t be alarmed if I surrender to weakness and stay in bed for a few days. Don’t send for a doctor unless I specially desire you to do so.”

There was a beseeching tone in his voice that drove all the mocking humour out of her eyes.

“Poor man !” she said, coming up suddenly to him and holding out her hand heartily. “Don’t fear to trust me. *I*, too, have had to pay the penalty that we must all pay sooner or later when we are found out in a sin that outrages the world. I am sorry for you. You may rest assured that you are safe in my house.”

"What do you mean?" he stammered, trying to look dignified and failing signally in the attempt.

"I mean that I have been too unhappy myself ever to add knowingly to the unhappiness of a fellow-creature, Mr. Denham. If you wish to stay quiet and unseen in my house for some reason you don't like to confide to me, quiet and unseen you shall be. No one comes here but the tradesmen's boys."

"Are you a widow?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am a wife whose husband is rarely at home."

"Away on business or pleasure?"

Her face flushed at the tone more than the words of his enquiry.

"Perhaps a mixture of both," she said, scornfully; "I make him as happy as I can

when he comes home, and as questions bore him I never ask him any."

"A jealous and not too happy woman," he thought, pityingly; "thank God, Anna has never had to doubt or reproach *me* on that score." For a few moments he felt vastly superior to the unknown Mr. Greg, and warmly disposed to be a sympathetic friend to the probably neglected wife.

"Bless you for promising to save me from all unauthorised intrusion," he said, emotionally. Then to his infinite relief she went out of the room, and he flung himself on the sofa to try and get some rest for his weary body and soul.

While he rested and waited for his dinner she went back to the little kitchen that glowed and was brilliant with a goodly array of highly-polished copper

utensils, and took counsel with her servant about the new lodger's simple little repast.

“Go and do this marketing at once, Ellen,” she said, “and when you come back I must come and help you to cook. I shall get into his ways after a day or two, and then the late dinner will go like clock-work.”

“But master's come home this evening, hasn't he, ma'm?” Ellen asked; “trust me to cook the dinner; Mr. Greg can never bear you out of his sight when he is at home.”

Mrs. Greg smiled faintly. “His sense of expediency will make him spare me to-night, Ellen. We are not rich people; we must try to please and keep a lodger who is willing to pay liberally.”

"I suppose master has a good deal of money, as he's able to be about visiting so much," Ellen said, tentatively, but her mistress only replied with a cool look that checked the girl's curiosity.

"The sooner you start on your errands the sooner Mr. Greg's dinner will be set going," she said quietly. Then she went back to her own little sanctum, where a fine, well-set-up, soldier-like man lounged back in the one arm-chair, smoking and reading a newspaper.

A look of irrepressible love and pride overspread her face as she advanced towards him, and placing one hand on his shoulder, bent down and pressed her lips to the cheek he indolently offered to her caress.

"I heard you come in, Ted, dear, but I couldn't come to you at once. I was interviewing my new lodger."

"Man or woman?" he asked curtly.

"An elderly man, says he's an American, and wishes to live here as much in seclusion as possible."

Mr. Greg laughed. "Wants to be a dark horse, eh? Well, we'll humour his fancy if he pays us for it. Why do you wear black, Marian, when you know how I hate it?"

"Black is my only wear, because it's the cheapest," she said, trying to speak cheerfully.

He made an impatient movement. "Money! money! you always throw the want of 'money' at my head as soon as I come home. Have you got anything in

the house to give me? I've had no luncheon to-day."

"Shall I get you a chop, Ted?"

"If you've nothing better to give me,"
he said, crossly.

END OF VOL. I.







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